





The OTHER- WORLDER, EXPLORING the DUNGEON

2 WILD HUNT

HINAGI ASAMI

Illustration by Kureta

The **OTHER-**
WORLDER,
EXPLORING
the **DUNGEON**
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Tutu

A feline
beastmaid.

The tips of her
golden hair
tickled my neck.
Sinuous as a
leopard, she
straddled me. My
eyes were glued
to her warm,
lustrous skin.

"Tonight, I am
your dream,
your desires
incarnate,
your servant
of the flesh,
your bountiful
catch."



"O Holy Flames, conjoin with these elements and form a wall of light. Shine tranquility upon them, sustain their spirits, and erect a protective barrier!"

Arvin's and Zenobia's defensive spells enveloped the dragonoise—

"Magnificent Lillideas, bestow the graces of your mercy, your loyalty, and your divine protection upon your humble followers. Zammonglace Romea Teiring!"

"May you cleanse his blood upon
the throne of eternity and grant
him peaceful repose. We pray his
soul may rest in tranquility. O
holy Lillideas, the beasts
are no more."

Arvin picked
up Sanperié's
head and
prayed as he
cradled it in
his arms.



2

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ON
NEW YORK

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HINAGI ASAMI

TRANSLATION BY ALEXANDRA MCCULLOUGH-GARCIA • COVER ART BY KURETA

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Contents

- Cover
- Insert
- Title Page
- Copyright
- Map
- Prologue
- Chapter 1 Breaking Bread the Otherworld Way
- Chapter 2 In Search of Glory
- Chapter 3 An Unraveling and a Mending
- Chapter 4 Thorny as a Thistle
- Chapter 5 Inferno
- Epilogue
- Afterword
- Yen Newsletter

MAP OF THE OTHER DIMENSION:

The Right Continent

The
Maudubaffle
Ocean

The Heuress Forest

Abandoned Dungeon

Remlia (The Tower of Legions)

Campsite

Remlia Port



PROLOGUE

[41ST DAY]

A corridor twisted through the dim dungeon before opening into a cavernous chamber. Rows of enormous columns stood throughout, and a grotesque, deformed king's throne hewn from a mass of metal sat deep in the back, both relics of a lost civilization.

The clamorous clashing of swords spilled out from within. Armor jostled, the living panted, and the bones of the repulsive walking dead crunched. A party of adventurers fought in a circle, hemmed in by a gang of bones, humanoid skeletons whose flesh and other organs had long ago decomposed and sloughed off. Green light smoldered in their sunken eye sockets. How they managed to move without any brains or muscles was a mystery. They assaulted the living with beaten, busted old weapons they'd held on to from their own runs at life. Nobody knew where the throne, or these skeletons who protected it, came from. All we adventurers could say for sure was that we couldn't delve any deeper into the dungeon without defeating them.

A youthful knight cleaved one of the undead in two with a single slash of his sword while keeping his companions protected behind his shield. A lightly armored girl whirled her spear around, smashing bones on impact. Then a voluptuous mage raised up her prayers in praise of the gods with whom she'd consecrated her covenant and put the shattered ghoul back together. Eyes gleaming blue under her spell, the reconstructed soldier went berserk and set to violently attacking its bony brethren.

My eyes focused on a young boy wielding a longsword. Circling around the rest of the party, he flailed his sword wildly, cutting all it touched to ribbons. In that manner, he single-handedly chipped away at the enemies closing in all around them. Forty-two skeletal soldiers remained. The boy's breathing grew labored; even if he took out all of them, the battle would be far from over.

“Éa, cover Shuna.”

“You got it—!”

At my command, my younger sister-in-law released an arrow. It flew straight through the forehead of a cadaver poised to hurl a spear at the young boy, Shuna, shattering its skull and sending the fragments flying. An impressive show of skill.

“Darling, I’m just about ready.”

“Okay, do your worst.”

My wife—in name only—thrust her staff into the ground, then spread her arms out wide. The light flickered from her eyes as she entered a trance. I sensed a torrent of unseen power rush to her.

“Arvin, we’re gonna clean the rest up in one go,” I informed him. “On my signal, activate your defense.”

“Aye,” Arvin, the former knight, responded through my receiver. Beside me, I heard tender, enchanting exaltations rise up to the gods.

“My lord Ezeus, grant thy lowly servant a drop of thy primordial might, a blaze burning a crimson deeper than my blood,” chanted Lana. “Holy fire, emerge as a devastating inferno. Hallowed flame, swallow the masses before thee and, as would a dragon’s breath, like a purifying force from the heavens, devour this world ruled by fate. Show yourselves, O mirrors of destruction and calamity, redder than red. Through these primeval tenets of the world, I decimate thee to the last!”

A small flame burst to life before her but quickly flared into a roaring conflagration—a massive ball of fire. Deep within, a terrifying shadow flexed its powerful back muscles.

“Arvin, shields up! Put all you’ve got into it!”

“*Everyone, behind me!*” he called out, and the party drew close to him. Éa cast a protective light over Shuna as he caught up to the group a bit late.

“*Magnificent Lillideas, grant us your mercy, your devotion, and your divine protection. Let my prayers and my shield deny all conceivable suffering and*

pain. Zammonglace Romea Teiring!” chanted Arvin. He raised his shield, and a dome of light cascaded down around us.

Then the mage beside him lifted her cane and prayed, *“O holy fire, conjoin with these elements and become a light to shine tranquility upon us, sustain our spirits, and protect us from all flames!”* At that, a geometric pattern branched out over the dome; it began to revolve like a mechanical cog, strengthening the defensive barrier.

Hearing a low chuckle at my side, I turned to find Lana, completely different from her usual self. A crazed look had come over her. *“Hoense Romea Dragbane!”* she bellowed, conjuring a burning orb that shot out directly above Arvin and the rest of the party, then ruptured. Then a napalm-like inferno engulfed every last skeleton. One by one they dropped, writhing as they disintegrated. For a moment, I hallucinated and heard shrieking, strangled death cries emanating from within the blaze.

“You outdid yourself, Lana. You can stop now,” I told her, calling my wife by name. The inferno’s wrath was bearing down on Arvin and the others. Although the bulwark of light protected them from the blaze, it couldn’t completely stave off the heat, which was clearly suffocating them. We were standing a decent way from the conflagration, but the scorching blasts of hot air reached us even there. Such an intense blaze could quickly eat through all the oxygen in an enclosed area like a dungeon, including the large chamber we were in.



“Lana?” The undead showed no more signs of stirring, but the fire would not abate.

“Lana! Stop! It’s over!” Éa cried, shaking her sister by the shoulders. She got no response.

“Éa, do something,” I urged. “They’re gonna cook to death!”

“All right. Time for the last resort.”

She moved directly behind her sister and suddenly took both of Lana’s bountiful breasts in her hands. Then she squeezed them, deftly wiggling all ten fingers to lift, lower, separate, and join Lana’s boobs. My head bobbed with her every motion, bewitched.

Could I get in on this?

“Huh?”

Éa tilted her head quizzically. “That’s so weird... This always brings her back.”

The trance refused to relinquish its iron hold on Lana even as Éa kept her grip on the woman’s chest. Talk about an unbelievably surreal scene. It captivated me for a moment, but my friends were still neck deep in fire. With not a moment to lose, I fell back on my last resort, drawing near my wife and whispering in her ear.

“Umm, so...” Emergency or not, it still embarrassed me to continue. “You look as cute as ever,” I murmured.

“.....”

Gradually, the trance receded, allowing her usual innocent and self-conscious expression to return. She flushed red all the way to the tips of her ears and let out a strange “*Eeyaaah!*” sort of squeal.

“Come onnnnn! At least wait until you’re outside to get all lovey-doveyyyy!” Beltriche, the young girl, screamed—not through a transmitter, but directly from her mouth. She must have really had some ears on her to overhear us talking all the way out in the corridor.

After wriggling free from her sister’s embrace, Lana shrank into a crouch in a

corner of the passageway, cradling her head in her hands and quietly moaning, “Aaaaaaaah!”

“Good work,” I told her, then casually stole a glance at her ryvius. Of the two test tubes lined up next to each other on the device, the one that displayed Lana’s blue external magic reserves for spell concoction had been drained of every last drop.

“Éa, get *those* arrows out.”

“You got it, Yaya,” she responded, using the nickname she’d given me after I became her older brother. We both nocked the special arrows we’d been saving.

“Souya, here it comes—the main event.”

At Arvin’s warning, we trained our bows on the king’s throne. Ashes from the bones rose and fluttered through the air, then began to swirl around the royal seat.

“Isolla, display each party member’s ryvius status. Just give me their internal magic reserves,” I bade the artificial intelligence robot hanging from Arvin’s waist. Internal magic referred to the capacity one had to recover from wounds. As long as you had some of this chaotic mana left, you could lose an arm or a leg, or have your organs collapse, and they’d regenerate as if nothing had ever happened.

(Arvin: 40/120; Shuna 10/75; Bel 30/90; Zenobia 40/50) read the data displayed on my glasses. Shuna had fallen into more perilous territory than I’d expected.

What should we do? If we go the cautious route, our best bet is to retreat. As a famous general once said, “Let’s turn back. If we make it home, we can come back and try again.” And yet.

“Yo, Souya,” Shuna called out to me. “Don’t even try tellin’ us to retreat again. We got this.”

“Yeah, we do.”

He spoke fiercely, completely fired up. There was no escaping this. He’d hit

the middle of a growth spurt, so one or two fierce battles could tremendously influence his potential. This was a crucible; if he made it through, he'd gain invaluable experience he couldn't obtain easily otherwise.

"Arvin, cover Shuna. Bel, Zenobia, fall back to me," I ordered.

"*Got it,*" my party answered. In that same second, a light flashed before us to reveal an enormous crown. It settled atop the head of an equally colossal skeleton towering five meters tall. The behemoth wielded a massive sword befitting its stature; though rusted, chipped, and half-broken, it would surely send us minuscule adventurers to our deaths with a single blow. A bright green flame smoldering in its eye sockets, the undead giant unleashed a deafening roar. I flinched—no, it was more than that. My very soul seemed ready to shrink until it disappeared.

"Ugh—," Shuna grunted, assaulted up close by the earsplitting howl. Then, with a "*Raaaaaaaaaah!*" he let out an indomitable battlecry that shook off all his fear. Though he was as exhausted as he was fired up, neither his stance nor his blade betrayed the slightest sign of wavering.

"Shuna, just make us an opening. Don't go too crazy," I warned him.

"*Won't need to. We're takin' this bag of bones down.*"

"Arvin, step in if Shuna goes too far."

"*I'm on it,*" he replied before racing toward the colossus with the boy. The massive skeleton sluggishly lifted its mighty sword, then slammed it down with terrifying speed. The entire dungeon shook from the thundering boom, crash, and impact. As it rose once more, two shadows darted through the ashes the blade had stirred up.

First, Shuna sprinted toward the ghoul, dodging its strikes, and landed a blow. With a knee now sliced in half, the giant skeleton lost its balance and braced itself with a hand against the ground. Next, Arvin slammed his shield into its jaw in a brutal uppercut, the metal clanging like a bell. Had their foe been a living thing, the knight's wallop might have concussed the creature's brain enough to kill it. But we were dealing with the dead. Undeterred, the hulking revenant turned and thrust its sword at Arvin.

Violent sparks leaped through the air. Shuna had parried the giant's blade with his longsword. I almost couldn't believe the fantastical spectacle unfolding before my eyes. A brief beat later, their weapons began a frenzied dance—a sword fight pitting boy against colossus, blades clashing furiously.

"Yaya!" My little sister's voice shook me back to reality. I'd lost myself for a second, completely mesmerized.

"Éa, we're aiming for its neck. Think you can do it?" I asked her.

"In my sleep."

Shuna brandished his steel with perfect precision, pushing his skills past their limits to new extremes. He'd tapped into the strength of someone shoved up against the brink of life, essentially dangling from that cliff with nothing but his pinkie. As if to prove the point, his ryvius was being depleted drastically by the second. His sword radiated heat from the collisions and intensity of the battle. An even match would've shocked anyone, but Shuna was dominating.

The skeleton keened in frustration, slashing its blade in a mighty swing. Ducking under the horizontal swipe, Shuna scraped his weapon against the ground, then hacked one of the giant's thick arms *in half*. A second later, he grimaced, shaken by tremors the limb caused as it smashed into the ground.

"Mr. Shuna's ryvius has fallen to zero."

Isolla's warning sent a chill slithering down my spine. A tense moment later, the colossus's blade flew toward Shuna—but Arvin cut in, delivering a devastating strike with a ferocious cry. The Skeleton King's sword flew straight into a nearby column—still attached to the hand that gripped it.

"Aaaaaaaah!" the two men shouted as one. Their swords zigged and zagged, hacking off the thing's legs to send it toppling. Although its severed arm stuck to the column and the legs strewn about began squirming in an attempt to return to their master, the main body could move no longer.

"Now!" Éa and I released our bolts at almost the exact same instant. The two projectiles, a little too aberrant to call true arrows, traced slight arcs through the air and drove into the giant's neck simultaneously.

"Arvin! Get Shuna behind your shield!" I yelled. "And don't forget to cover

yourself, too!”

The man grabbed Shuna by the head and pushed him under cover.

“...?” The behemoth appeared confused as it felt for the arrows lodged in its neck. Then they exploded, beheading it. The crown fell off the severed skull, tumbled, and rolled to a stop against Arvin’s shield. Both he and Shuna brought their swords down on it in unison to shatter it. With a dying wail, the bones and blade of the fallen Skeleton King dissolved to dust and were swept off by the wind.

“Éa, Isolla, scour the area for enemies.”

“Copy.”

“Got it.”

I did my part, too, and took stock. No apparent threats. The bones now reduced to ashes showed...no signs of regenerating. A hush descended on the chamber.

Bel and Zenobia ran over to me.

“No remaining foes detected,” reported Isolla.

“Same here,” added Éa.

Checking one last time for myself, I found nothing that moved but my party members. I examined every corner, even inspected the ceiling. Then I took a deep breath in and let a looooong one out.

“Mission complete,” I announced. “Great work, everybody.”

They hollered and cheered, “We did iiiiiiiit!”

Shuna whooped louder than anyone before instantly passing out with a smile on his face. Bel and Éa took each other’s hands and jumped for joy; even Zenobia raised a grin. Lana glanced over at us, clearly feeling a little left out.

And so, on our third attempt, our combined party finally made it past the ninth floor.



The Tower of Legions—this was the dungeon against which we tested our skills and luck. It had a few unique quirks, the first being the teleportation devices called portals found every five floors. Despite all the advancements I'd lived with back in the modern world, the technology behind these things completely baffled me. To be fair, though, nobody here really knew how they worked, either.

The portals dated back at least three civilizations, or so they said. But nothing "they said" in this world could ever be taken at face value. Orally transmitted legends of famous heroes would often attribute the feats of two people to a single figure; they would also fuse two separate foes into one, presumably to keep things balanced. You couldn't trust these tales at all. Point was, the portals were technological mysteries.

This "Other Dimension" had three continents. If you went back through their shared histories, you'd find a story detailing the collapse and rebirth of civilizations. The dungeons found on each continent were essentially remnants of those ruined societies.

The Tower of Legions was apparently the oldest of the surviving relics. Some said it was a horn that had once belonged to the giant who created the world, a glimpse into an ancient culture, or a tower the Legion Gods had deserted.

But I digress. In any event, every fifth floor had a portal, and a guard stood watch at each level just before them. These relics of long-lost civilizations blocked adventurers' paths, as if to test them. The humongous skeleton we'd just defeated had been one of those guardians.

On our first attempt, the skeletal soldiers had mobbed and driven us off. On our second, the Skeleton King had hit a home run using one of our vanguards as a ball, forcing us to retreat. This third time had proved to be the charm; using all the strongest weapons we currently had at our disposal, we'd eked out a win. And so we at last made it to the tenth level. I was truly grateful to everyone in my party. My wallet felt too light for comfort, but I could always save up again with my side hustle.

The truth was, I had come to this floor before with a particular goal in mind and had shrewdly taken advantage of the moment to make a map of its layout.

Now my party and I ventured not for the exit portal but for a spot where we could take a break. After making sure no monsters had set up camp there, we made our way inside the nook. Around twenty people could sit comfortably in the space, which was constructed of stone like every other area of the dungeon. It had an ancient fountain in one corner. Luckily, we had the place to ourselves. Since we weren't officially working together as a party, we tried to avoid prying eyes.

"Shuna, you okay?" I asked.

"Never better," he replied from where he dangled, pinned under Arvin's arm.

"Are we not going to the portal?" inquired the former knight, to which I answered, "The danger isn't over until we're home. If a monster came for us now, we wouldn't stand a chance. We need to take a break."

"Fair point."

I signaled to the others, urging them to rest. They all laid down their packs and took seats on the ground. I also slung off my backpack and started pulling out its contents.

Now then, time to get ready to eat.

But first, I went over and rinsed my hands in the fountain, lathered them with soap, scrubbed under my nails, and rolled up my sleeves to wash all the way to my elbows. Then I filled a pot with water and got the portable burner going. The next things I got out were pieces of bread I'd wrapped in preservative leaves. A popular street food, the flatbread was made with whole-wheat flour and fried in oil. We were going to eat these loaded with the fillings I'd packed in jars and brought with me to complete our dungeon meal for the day: wraps.

We had three fillings to choose from: meat simmered in oil, cheese, and fresh tomatoes. Personally, I had my eye on the meat. I'd seasoned some pork and patiently cooked it in oil over a low heat for hours. As long as you completely doused it in more oil after it cooled, you could prevent the meat from oxidizing. This was a well-known French technique, and the resulting dish would be known as confit. It was the latest preserved meal for adventurers I'd developed. I used to think all the food in this realm tasted like dirt, but once I started actively looking, I came across loads of delicious recipes. The only thing that

sucked was that the tastiest gems were usually the most hidden.

Lately, I'd taken to going around asking more experienced senior adventurers for (paid) advice. One of the most valuable tips I'd gathered came from the so-called Father of Adventurers, who'd told me to "do whatever [I] need to do to get medicinal shoots in [my] vanguards." A medicinal shoot was a kind of herb found here. Honestly, it looked exactly like basil, but further analysis confirmed it was an entirely different plant. It still tasted the same, though.

Medicinal shoots slowed down the internal magic consumption measured on our ryviuses. Basically, it was up to me to get Arvin, Shuna, and Bel, our three vanguards, to take them, even if I had to shove them down their throats. I'd tried tossing the herbs in salads, sautéing them, mixing them in with butter or flour, and grinding them down into a paste to lather on a whole range of dishes. In the end, after much trial and error, I'd found salting the herbs before drying and crushing them into powder worked best.

Adventuring severely taxed the body, especially for those who fought on the front lines. Vanguards needed plenty of salt and fat to keep them going. By ensuring they got herbs into their systems every time they salted anything with the powder, I could kill two birds with one stone.

Using tongs, I pulled the pieces of meat out of the jar and laid them on the slices of bread before grating cheese over them and placing some roughly sliced tomatoes on top. Next I smeared on some mayonnaise to add extra calories and sprinkled the herbal salt over everything. I gave them a quick, light wrap with the preserving leaves to shape them into crepes, and they were complete. I made quick work of preparing enough for everyone, then plated all the wraps on a frying pan. Once I got some water boiling, I shook black soybean tea into the pot and called it a meal.

"It's ready," I announced. "Shuna, think you can eat?"

"Yeah."

Arvin helped the limp boy up. Everyone except for the elven sisters said a brief prayer to their respective gods before digging in.

"St. Lillideas, we thank thee for our daily bread, our prey, and your holy graces," went Arvin's prayer.

“O Lord Ukhazol who raised me, and Lady Gladwein who steeled my blade, I have lived another day and had another delicious meal placed before me. Thank you, thank you,” went Shuna’s.

“Holy Flames, ancestor to all, turn thy grace into my sustenance and bless this body,” prayed Zenobia.

“O Lord Ukhazol who raised me, and all you other gods who have anything to do with the heavens and food, I thank you very much.” Bel didn’t mince words.

They all dug into their wraps.

“Mmm, so good!” exclaimed Shuna, still beat but already looking a bit brighter.

“This meat is sooo tasty!” squealed Bel. This was looking like a winner so far.

“But wait, Souya.”

“Hmm?”

Arvin, enjoying his meal with great refinement, called out to me. I was honestly more concerned about bringing Lana and Éa their wraps than sitting down to chat. “What was that arrow you used? Was it enchanted?”

“Oh, I was curious about that, too,” Zenobia chimed in, seizing on the question. I’d never intended to keep it a secret from them, so I decided to lay it all out. I pulled one of the used arrows out of my pocket, or one of the attachments for the arrows, to be precise. It was a long, thin metal tube.

“We packed these to the brim with water and metal pellets,” I explained. “When they exploded, they blew the giant’s head off.”

Zenobia took the tube from me and quizzically put it up to her ear. “I can sense a little magic in here,” she noted.

“Yeah, it’s got a Mythlanic gold piece imbued with some flamecraft sealed inside.” We’d happened to hit upon these attachments as a by-product of trying to develop another item still in the works. That one was just a step away from completion.

“Mythlanic gold!” Zenobia gasped. “Hang on... Just how many gold pieces did you drop on this one day of exploration? How much is it going for now?”

“At the time, it went for twenty-two gold.”

“Wha—?” she spluttered, astonished. “Souya, you mean you spent forty-four gold today alone? Y-you didn’t take out a loan for this or anything, did you?”

“Heh-heh-heh, Zeno,” chuckled Bel. “Not to brag, but I know exactly how Sou brings in so much gold!”

“What?! Tell me!” Zenobia demanded. “I’ve got to know!”

Bel stuck her chin out proudly. How terribly modest. The mage hung on her every word. This was hard to watch. Apparently uninterested, the two boys kept munching away at their wraps.

“The answer...is this!” Bel proclaimed, lifting up an almost-empty jar of mayonnaise. She’d hit the nail on the head. “Zeno, the meal Sou made for us has some of this *manuyaise* in it.”

“*Mayonnaise*,” I corrected.

“How much would you say this goes for?” Bel put to Zenobia.

“Huh? I mean, I’ve never seen it before, but I doubt it’d cost more than honey, so maybe three silver pieces at most?” she guessed.

“They’re five gold pieces each.”

“Whaaaaat?!” Zenobia’s eyes almost popped out of her head.

“I noticed some of Lady Gladwein’s disciples putting it on their meat jerky the other day. I hadn’t seen it in the archipelago or in this area, either, and when I found out the Zavah Night Owl Trade Group were the ones selling it, I remembered they work super closely with Sou and connected the dots right away. I just knew he must’ve whipped it up.”

“Nevertheless, that’s quite a sum. Much too expensive.” Arvin couldn’t have been more correct.

“Wait, hear me out. When I first started, I charged one gold piece per jar to try to appeal to more affluent customers. We talked it up, saying it’s great on raw or steamed vegetables.”

You could get cuts of meat almost anywhere in the city. The upper classes had

grown tired of such easily obtainable foodstuffs and instead preferred to dine on sumptuous seafood or uncommon vegetables. Excuse my language, but the common fare here sucked, despite the high-quality ingredients that went into it. Call it another pitfall of the previous civilization collapsing, maybe. Although people here lived in relative comfort, all that went out the window when it came to food. And nowhere did that hold truer than with their seasonings. Mostly imported from the Central Continent or the islands that lay between here and there, their spices had flavor profiles that couldn't have clashed worse with the cuisine here if they'd tried.

Cooks here would take an absolutely gorgeous, two-day-aged tenderloin fillet, then scorch it until it was a crispy, crunchy mess utterly devoid of fat or flavor. After that, they doused it in this vinegar that tasted like fermented fish, rubbed tons of salt all over it, and, to add insult to injury, drizzled on a chili oil that was almost too spicy to consume. Once, I'd splurged to sample this dish at a high-end restaurant, only to end up nearly murdering the chef.

"But then," I continued, "the second day, we sold way more than we expected. By the third day, people were lining up in the morning to get it and we completely ran out. On the fourth day, we found out another merchant was selling jars of mayonnaise at two gold pieces." Reselling, that is. "After we came back from our second unsuccessful trek through the dungeon, they were going for five gold pieces a pop. So multiply that by eight, and altogether we made about ninety-six gold in profit. But we barely just broke even with that after factoring in all the production costs." If you added in all the start-up fees and the expense of the jars, we'd actually dipped into the red.

"Then why don't you make more of this 'mayonnaise' right away? You could make a fortune."

"I will, but I'm not gonna brand it as a luxury product anymore. It only takes a few simple ingredients to make, so I've asked the trade group to get those for me wholesale."

It really didn't get simpler: All you needed were egg yolks, vinegar, oil, and salt. We swapped traditional eggs for ones from chochos, avian monsters that lived in the dungeon. Only a single mountain stood between us and the ocean, so we could harvest rock salt along its shores. As for vinegar and oil, we could

get them cheaply and reliably from the farming country. Thanks to Machina's strict instructions, the Zavah Night Owl Trade Group probably already had a large-scale production line up and running in one of its warehouses. Sometimes I wondered whether this was what I should be asking of the AI robot that, setting its status in my home world aside, possessed technologies and wisdom on par with that of the gods in this dimension. Still, Machina did seem pretty into it. Maybe she enjoyed it.

"It'll probably go on sale either tomorrow or the day after. I'm planning to set the cost at five copper pieces, three if you bring your own bottle."

"Now that's much too cheap," Arvin shot back. Yeah, that's exactly what both young heads of their respective trade groups had said, too. But you couldn't change my mind on this. Food is for everyone. I didn't care if our profits were even lower.

The less altruistic truth was that someone had already stolen the recipe and passed it around. We'd only lose to these imitations if we set the price too steep. I'd been an idiot for taking the merchant game here so lightly. We'd run the shop we pegged as the main perpetrators out of business, but others just kept popping up. I didn't have the time or patience to deal with proprietary issues, so I'd presented the mayonnaise and its recipe to the king and left it at that. In the end, I learned a good lesson: I have zero talent as a businessman.

"Yaya! I'm starving!" my little sister fumed. I grabbed wraps for her, Lana, and myself and headed over to them.

"Sorry."

"You took forever! You never stop when you start talking about food!" Éa griped, then promptly took one of the flatbreads.

"Lana?" She seemed a little out of it. I waved my hand in front of her face. No response.

"Éa, what's wrong with her?" I went pale.

"Hmm, she probably used too much magic. She always tries to look good in front of you and overdoes it. Don't worry, she'll snap out of it soon."

But I do worry. Is this gonna have any long-term effects? I should make some

time to study up on mages.

“Heh-heh-heh, those heim fools, losing their minds over mere mayonnaise.” A devilish grin on her face, Éa pulled another jar out of her bag. “It can’t even hold a candle to this tartar sauce!”

“Dude. Stop sneaking our food in your bag without asking. That won’t stay good for long, you know.”

“Oh, come on. Machina said it’d last for at least two days.”

“Next time, ask me first.”

“Okaaay.” Éa dropped a dollop of tartar sauce on her wrap, took a bite, and squirmed in delight. “Mmm, sooo yummy! Ooh, but it’d be better with a little kick to it,” she added, then took yet another jar out of her bag, this one bright red.

“Éa, you brought the sriracha sauce with you, too?”

“Machina said it was fine since it won’t go bad,” she protested.

“Well, I guess that’s okay. But we don’t have too many of those. Don’t go dumping it all over the place.”

“Whaaat?!” She balked. “.....Then make more.”

“No waay, I can’t just... Well, maybe I could.” It’d be unreasonable, but I could ask Machina to give it a try.

“Hmm,” murmured Bel, suddenly at my side. She stared at Éa’s grub like a curious cat.

“Crap!” the elf tried to hide the bottles, but it was too late.

“Shunie!” Bel called out. “They’ve got something really tasty-lookin’ over here!”

“Ooh, yeah?” Shuna came over to us, a bit perkier than before.

“No fair! You elves are so sneaky!” Bel pouted. “Share your bounty with us poor, miserable heims, I beg of yooouuuu!”

“Éaaaa, I’m gonna faint from exhaustion. Lemme have soome!” Shuna begged.

“All right! But only a taste! Just a little bit, okay?! Don’t hang on me like that! I’m gonna drop it!” Éa groaned as the two climbed all over her. Watching these three get along so well warmed my heart. Maybe that was what made seeing Arvin’s face completely devoid of emotion sting so much.

After lunch, we all registered ourselves at the tenth-floor portal and made it back to the top safely. It had taken forty-one days, but we’d made it to the tenth floor. My ultimate goal was still the fifty-sixth. This was going to take quite a while.

CHAPTER 1

Breaking Bread the Otherworld Way

[42ND DAY]

As adventurers, we didn't necessarily explore the dungeon every single day. Our work depended on our ryviuses, the magical devices a pioneering adventurer long before us had developed. They consumed the internal magic found within all living beings to heal wounds and normally took about two days to be fully restored. The same went for our external magic reserves, the energy we needed to conjure any kind of spell. Herein lay our latest problem.

"I'm sorry, darling," Lana lamented back in our tent at camp.

"Why should you apologize? We never could've taken that colossus down if you hadn't been there. Take your time and rest up."

Lana's external magic vial refused to refill. A whole day had passed since we'd returned from the dungeon, but her ryvius remained stubbornly clear, totally empty. All elves were susceptible to this. As a race, they enjoyed a remarkable propensity for mage work, usually boasting double the external magic capacity of most other races. Lana had triple.

But that came with a downside: Their mana reserves replenished themselves much slower than other races'. And as I'd learned this time around, if they ran their magic completely dry, that recovery process took even longer. We'd planned a two-day break, but at this rate, we might have to leave Lana behind on our next expedition. No one could deny her flamecraft packed an insane amount of power—it was a straight-up knockout punch. But that alone wouldn't get us past every obstacle the dungeon had in store. If only it were that easy.

Trying to push through five floors and make it to the next portal in one go was a suicide mission. We had to first map everything out, take stock of potential

enemies, and plan a logical route. For this part, at least, we wouldn't necessarily have to rely on her firepower.

"Please don't look so down. It's not the end of the world," I reassured her.

"But..."

"We won't have any trouble scoping the floors out without you."

"That's what bothers me."

Ahh, she doesn't want to be left out, huh?

"Anyway, let's take it easy today. C'mon, we can put a movie on. A nice one." I laid Lana down, rolled up a blanket and propped it up behind her, then fished my tablet out of a corner of the tent. "What are you in the mood for?"

I pulled up our huge database of films. It had belonged to one of my lost squad members.

"A Chaplin title, please."

"You got it."

I got to searching for one she hadn't seen yet when she told me, "I'd like to see *The Great Dictator*."

"Coming right up," I said, and started screening *The Great Dictator* for the sixth time. She gave me a subtle invitation to sit next to her. We each held up one corner of the tablet.

This looked a lot like something. Our marriage existed on paper only, but I could imagine someone peeking in on us and mistaking it for the real thing. I suddenly got kind of nervous.

"Um...y-you really love this one, don't you, Lana?"

"I like to study the way he raises his tone or pauses while delivering his speeches. It gives me tricks I can use while casting spells," she explained.

"Wait, really?"

"My master used to say that magic, stripped down to its most basic definition, is essentially acting. We pray to the gods for miracles with flowery, eloquent language and try to mold our voices and expressions to their liking."

Does that mean mages in this dimension fall on the liberal arts side of things? I'd pegged them as more STEM minded.

"I prayed a little too passionately this last time, so I came close to breaking the covenant I have with my god and falling into a deep coma," Lana admitted. "I'll be more careful going forward."

"Please do. Pay especially close attention to the toll it takes on your body."

"I'll do what I can." *So you're not gonna give me a yes, are you? Overachievers can be a handful.*

After the opening credits, scenes of trench warfare began to play, accompanied by the subtitles and annotations Machina had added. Having read them five times already, Lana understood pretty much everything going on. Personally, I preferred observing her as she watched the movie over following the on-screen action. I gazed a little too intensely at her. She felt me staring. Our eyes met. Our hands brushed against each other. Our faces naturally drew so close, we could feel each other's breath graze our cheeks. It was still morning, but we finally stepped up to that line and—

"Whatcha up to, you guys?"

—got totally blocked.

Éa burst into the tent, scrambled to take off her boots, and squeezed herself right in between Lana and me. "Is this the dude with the tiny mustache again? I wanna see Mifune."

"Not today," Lana refused. "I want to watch this one."

"Boooo!"

The sisters snuggled up, pressing their shoulders and cheeks together. Éa brazenly draped her bare legs over my lap.

Y-yeah, I guess this isn't so bad, either. Is it really okay for me to be here, too? I'm not gonna drop dead tomorrow or anything, am I?

As I ruminated on these anxieties and blessings—

"Otherworlder, you in?"

—I heard hoofbeats and a voice.

Who the hell dares disturb my precious cuddle time?!

“Hellooo!”

“I’m comin’, I’m comin’!”

Reluctantly, I stepped out of the tent and found a man astride a horse. A patch covered his left eye, and nothing about him, neither his shield nor his sword nor his armor nor even his body, looked brand-new. This middle-aged, battle-hardened adventurer by the name of Medîm was otherwise known as the Father of Adventurers. Most people called him Pops.

“Got a minute?”

“No. I’m extremely busy.” I wanted to spend the entire day nestling with these elven sisters. We’d just finished a grueling expedition. I deserved a treat.

“You don’t say? Come.” Guess he disagreed.

“Is this mandatory?”

“Aye.” *Then why did you even ask me in the first place?*

Lana and Éa popped out of the tent, perhaps a little worried about me.

“I’m borrowing him,” Pops informed the ladies. Paying no mind to their whines of protest, he dragged me up onto his steed with him. One second, I was sitting next to two beautiful elven sisters; the next, I was riding a horse with some middle-aged dude. The oddly sized saddle hurt my butt.

“I heard you made it to the tenth floor,” he noted.

“Yes, we did. It wasn’t easy, though.”

“Since you lot took care of the Skeleton King, adventurers get to sail through to the tenth floor for the next two days. Stop by the bar now and I bet they’ll be clamoring to buy you a drink.”

Was that how it worked? Now it made sense. Lana and Éa had been down to the tenth floor before, but I was pretty sure they hadn’t yet fought the skeletal soldiers.

“So what do you need me for, Pops?”

“The king has collapsed. I need your help.”



This was just my personal opinion, but the only reason the Kingdom of Remlia (where the Tower of Legions lay) functioned at all was their ruler’s peaceful reign. Countless adventurers dreamed of emulating his origin story, one that told how a man who had started with nothing but the clothes on his back and a single sword ended up ruling an entire nation. The weight of his personal brand constantly brought explorers from far and wide to his domain.

And not to dwell on an impertinent topic, but what would happen if such a renowned figure bit the dust? Though King Remlia was indeed an astute sovereign, history has shown us time and time again that wise parents do not necessarily beget wise offspring. The firstborn prince had apparently been quite accomplished, but his death had passed the right of succession down to his younger brother, the absolute epitome of everything stupid. If he ever took the throne, all hell would break loose—no question. You didn’t have to try very hard to hear people griping about him in every corner of town.

People in positions of authority never had an easy time shaking free of a bad reputation, but the prince didn’t have a single clue how much his subjects detested him. It must take a special kind of genius to be that impervious to hatred directed at you—to be what the rest of the world calls a dense idiot. He was a coward, a dirty politician, a sexual predator, and entirely bereft of regal manners—or at least that’s how his older sister put it. Personally, I’d probably sign up for a rebellion if he ever got hold of the royal reins, too. He would unquestionably come for me at some point, so it would be better to strike first.

Tensions brewing in the Heuress Forest, where Lana and Éa had grown up, complicated matters even further. Citizens of the Kingdom of Remlia regarded elves who hailed from there as enemies because of a war that had broken out between the two neighbors. As an Otherworlder, I had no way of judging which party had been in the wrong. I wouldn’t dream of expressing an opinion on it.

The elves seemed to have a lot on their plates, too. The grip that the ruling Heuress Clan needed to unite its people grew weaker by the day. Everyone

could see this would eventually result in bloodshed. If a civil war broke out among them, the sparks of unrest would almost certainly find their way to the Kingdom of Remlia.

The only thing keeping all these moving pieces in a delicate balance was King Remlia himself. It would be a total pain in the ass if he died. I needed him to hang on for at least another year.

“But why did you come to me for that?” I asked Pops as we arrived at the castle.

“You healed Princess Éa, didn’t you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t press you on that.”

Now that’s some aged wisdom right there. He’s a pro at keeping the perfect distance. But I didn’t treat Éa—that was my partner, whom I brought to this world with me.

“Lord Souya!”

A maid rushed at me as soon as we stepped inside the palace. A beastmaid with silver hair and pointed ears. I felt relieved to see she’d lost the eye patch and didn’t have any scars left.

“I’m terribly sorry for calling you on such short notice,” she apologized. “I understand you were in between expeditions, but you must have had many other matters to attend to.”

“Actually, he didn’t look busy at all to me,” opined Pops.

“I was incredibly busy!” I insisted. *Stay outta this, old man. Don’t you see how lounging around with two beauties is urgent business?!*

“I do hope you’ll forgive the imposition. After our healer determined this a lost cause, I was at my wits’ end,” Lanceil explained, her ears apologetically lowered.

Lanceil was King Remlia’s illegitimate child. The monarchs of this world all treated beastfolk as second-class citizens. Part of the blame for that lay with a beastman who, ages and ages ago, had once ruled the race as king of the

beasts. Because of this, Lanceil had no legal claim to the throne even though she was a direct descendent of Remlia. In fact, she was treated as nothing more than a chambermaid. And yet, after all that, she remained devoted to her father and cared for his well-being. Honestly, I didn't hate that about her.

"I doubt I'll be of any help, but I'll do what I can. Just don't get your hopes up too high."

"Thank you!" Her tail wagged furiously beneath her skirt. Her hopes were totally up. This didn't look good. An external wound or something like a simple infectious disease I could probably handle, but not even Machina would be able to treat diseases endemic to this world, cancers, or anything afflicting his organs. That being said, I couldn't judge either way without first checking him out.

She led me to her father's private chamber. Pops waited out in the hall.

"If you'll excuse the intrusion, Your Majesty. Lord Souya has come to call on you," Lanceil announced.

The king lay recumbent and ill on his bed. He was bald, and though his physique was as stately as ever, his face nevertheless failed to mask how unwell he felt. The pungent smells of all the medicine piled up in the room and assaulted my nose.

"Right. Forgive me, Souya, for pulling you away from your work."

"Please don't concern yourself. It's no trouble at all; I happened to have some free time." *You can't exactly complain to a monarch, after all.* "I'm afraid I don't have much expertise to share, but I hope to be of a little help."

"Aye, as do I—or so I'd like to say, but I am no young lad. I expect this is a sign I've reached the end of the road, rather than an illness. Do not blame yourself if there is nothing for it," he responded, resigned.

"Machina, help me out here," I whispered to her through my glasses, then began the examination.

"If you'll excuse the prying questions, Your Majesty, might I ask you to describe your symptoms for me?"

“Aye. Last year, must have been after the war with the elves, I started to feel numbness and pain in my arms and legs,” he recounted. “I’d thought it a consequence of fatigue, but the sensations never relented, and now I struggle to merely lift myself out of bed.”

“Do you only feel pain in your limbs?”

“No, it’s all over.”

“How is your appetite?”

“Dismal.”

“I hate to ask, but have you had any difficulty urinating? Or have you experienced diarrhea?”

“Aye.”

“I’m going to examine you directly. Pardon my fingers.” I touched his leg. It felt swollen.

“Please tell me if you feel any pain.” I took out a pen and jabbed it rather forcefully into his big toe. “Does that hurt?”

“Not particularly.”

Coincidentally enough, I had a sneaking suspicion I knew what afflicted the king. This same disease was relatively well known to Japanese people.

“Would you please rise and sit up? Lanceil, give me a hand.”

The two of us nudged the king over to the edge of the bed. After having him hang both legs over the side, I tapped his knees a few times. A healthy person’s legs would have reflexively kicked up in response, but his didn’t budge.

Convinced beyond a doubt, I declared, “You have beriberi.”

“My analysis confirms these symptoms are ninety-eight percent consistent with beriberi,” Machina reported, stamping her seal of approval on my diagnosis.

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty,” I began. Lanceil’s face fell, showing her despondency. “But may I borrow your kitchen? I can treat this illness.”

Her despair turned instantly to joy.



Beriberi is a neurological disorder caused by thiamine deficiency. Symptoms first afflict the peripheral nerves in the limbs and can eventually cause the heart to malfunction, inducing death. It once essentially reached epidemic status in Japan.

Lanceil showed me a copy of the king's dietary regimen, confirming my suspicions. Every single day the king partook in lavish, sugar-packed sweets and excessive amounts of oil and salt, a holdover habit from his previous life as an adventurer. The unbalanced diet suggested that he might be a picky eater. And on top of that, it seemed he'd resorted to drinking away his worries until the wee hours, night after night.

Metabolizing sugar drains the body's stores of thiamine, and it also needs large amounts of the nutrient to metabolize alcohol. However, it's not especially difficult to replenish. Of the foods available in this realm, one could easily find it in wheat, pork, and beans. Pork in particular had loads of the stuff. All the more ironic, then, that the ruler of the Kingdom of Remlia, whose most famous products included dungeon pork, would find himself suffering from beriberi. All blame for the onset of this malady rested on his unbalanced diet, sweet tooth, and stress-induced drinking.

Standing in the palace kitchen we'd cleared of everyone else, I took stock of the array of cookware, dishes, and utensils. I'd expected more from what would grace the royal dining table, but nothing really dazzled me. I did, however, gaze enviously at the huge, useful-looking stove, the large cutting boards, and a few other accoutrements.

Now. "Machina, what ingredients should we go with?" I asked my AI partner.

"Pork would be the most efficient choice," she suggested.

"Lanceil, does His Highness eat pork?" I hadn't seen it come up once on the list of meals she'd shown me.

"No, he won't tolerate it. His Majesty is a good-natured man, but once, when our chef finely minced some pork and added it to a soup, the king flipped over the bowl and flew into a rage." Though it was a closely held secret, a dungeon

boar had apparently once grabbed him by the cape and flung him around.

That doesn't help. Thiamine dissolves in water, so a simple soup would've been the easiest way to pump it into him.

"Maybe I could whip up a pot of soup à la Mythlanica with some soybeans," I offered.

"His Majesty detests beans as well," Lanceil informed me.

Hmm, what should I make? Would the wheat wraps work?

As I racked my brain for ideas, Machina gave me another recommendation. "You could always turn to supplements."

"Right. But I've already gone and borrowed the kitchen. I want to have something to show for it."

"Lord Souya, who have you been speaking with?" asked Lanceil.

To an outsider, it must have looked as though I were talking to myself, so I explained. "My glasses. The fairy who lives in them gives me advice."

"I see! Of course you'd have something so wonderful!" she marveled, both hands clasped before her chest. I got the sense her evaluation of me had shot up. With expectations that high, I felt pretty sure my stock would plummet to the lowest depths of hell if I ever failed to meet that standard.

Putting that aside, I got back to strategizing. "Any other ingredients here high in thiamine?" I put to Machina.

"If we exclude pork and beans from consideration, the remaining locally available sources of thiamine include whole-wheat flour, chicken liver, chili peppers, raisins, garlic, and sesame. However, none of these contain even half the amount of thiamine found in pork."

"Lanceil, does the king ever have beastfolk bread?"

"It would be disrespectful to serve His Majesty such common fare."

"Hmm..."

"Mr. Souya, there is one more source filled with plentiful concentrations of the vitamin in question, though it is not of this world."

Once I heard Machina's idea, a wave of worry that Éa would throw a tantrum hit me, but I decided to go with it anyway.



Lanceil and I hopped on a horse and rode back to camp together. Éa found me grabbing what I'd come for and put up an enormous fuss, but I somehow managed to talk her down and headed back to the castle.

"So what is this, exactly?" Lanceil inquired. "Given Éa's reaction, I presume it must be extremely valuable."

"Instant ramen." Salt flavor, to be exact. I'd removed it from its original packaging to make it look home-cooked.

Surprisingly enough, instant ramen comes chock-full of thiamine. Not too long ago, a large swath of young people who subsisted mainly on instant meals and juice boxes had come down with beriberi. Manufacturing companies evidently took the lesson seriously and, eager to rid themselves of the bad publicity, had started adding copious amounts of thiamine to their products.

"It's super easy to make. All you do is add these noodles and the powder in this bag to a pot of boiling water and wait until this hourglass empties. That's all," I explained.

"Huh? Can it really be that simple?" She sounded incredulous.

The ramen would look a little plain without any toppings, so I garnished it with some chicken simmered in oil and medicinal shoots. And so it was done, quick as a flash. Now onward to the dining hall. I'd originally planned to bring the king's meal to his chambers, but driven by what I can only assume was his sense of royal etiquette, he'd dragged his feeble body out of bed and ventured over to the dining hall.

He sat at the head of a long dining table in the spacious room, with Pops sitting not too far away. Some middle-aged guy I didn't recognize joined them at the table as well. Well dressed and stout, he looked nothing like your typical adventurer. Besides the men at the table, a whole host of maids also stood in lines around the chamber. The solemn mood felt more than a bit over the top

for a bowl of ramen.

“Thank you for your patience, Your Majesty,” Lanceil announced as she placed the bowl before the king along with a fork and spoon. *Ah, I forgot to prepare a drink.*

“Just a moment, Lanceil,” cut in the unfamiliar chap. “I understand this man here is an Otherworlder—one married to an elf at that. Do you honestly think it wise to present fare from his hands before His Majesty?”

“Absolutely. I have complete confidence in Lord Souya,” she responded without hesitation. The fellow glared back at her.

“Can anyone vouch for the accuracy of your assessment, *beastmaid*?”

“I can,” Pops snarled, his face tight with fury. The menacing threat lacing his voice left the man trembling.

“B-but, Lord Medîm—”

“Hand it over. I’ll test it for poison myself.” The grizzled adventurer dragged the bowl of ramen toward him, then swallowed a spoonful of the broth. He furrowed his brows. “Hmm, I sense notes of sweetness in this salt-flavored broth. It’s curiously addictive. How very interesting. Personally, I’d have welcomed a bit more heat.”

That’s great, but I didn’t make it for you.

“Are these thin, long bits made from kneaded wheat?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s the main ingredient in them.”

Pops fished and stretched out some noodles with his fork, let some broth drain from them, then huffed and puffed as he placed them in his mouth. He chewed in silence.

“I see.....” He went to put down his fork—but changed course and dug into the bowl once more.

“...?!” The king started, flabbergasted. But Pops didn’t stop at the noodles; he popped medicinal shoots in his mouth and even dug into the chicken.

“Is this rabbit?”

“Precisely.” It was actually poultry, but I’d decided to pass it off as rabbit due to a series of complicated, bizarre circumstances.

“Where did you buy it?” Pops inquired. “Not many shops carry it.”

“I caught it myself.”

“How much do you want for it?”

“It’s not for sale.” My little sister would kill me.

“Well, we can quibble over the details later. I’d like to have seen a greater variety of vegetables on top. I get that we all need ’em but loads of adventurers have grown tired of medicinal shoots. I can see sautéed roots or fried garlic pairing well with this, too. And it’d be better with more meat. Not bad, all in all, even without the added novelty factor.” There you have it, ladies and gents: the Father of Adventurers’ official ramen review.

For his final act, he took the bowl in both hands and drained every last drop of the soup. “Somebody get me an ale.”

“Medîm...you’re supposed to taste it for poison, not devour the whole thing!” the king rebuked him. He had a point. *I’m sorry for your loss.*

“Lanceil, could you whip up another bowl for us?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll see to it at once.” She bounded happily out of the dining hall at my request.

“Souya, did Lanceil make that?” the king asked, his face awash with amazement.

“Yes. I provided the ingredients and instructed her on how to prepare it, but she took care of the rest.”

His eyes still trained on me, the king punched Pops in the side. It made a nice *whack* for someone in a theoretically weakened state. Medîm winced but forced out, “As you can see, Lord Chancellor, this young man is no knave trying to murder us with poison. Do you mean to stick around and nitpick the rest of us to death?”

“I—I think I’ll take my leave.” He petulantly scuffled out of the room.

I waited until I could no longer hear his footsteps, then asked Pops, “So who was that?”

“An Ellusionese marquis and adviser to our country—a nagging, pain-in-the-ass chancellor, if you will,” he filled me in. “Ever since Remlia took to his sickbed, the marquis has been strutting around the palace like he owns the place. Gods only know what rotten thoughts he’s got festering in that decrepit brain of his.”

“Enough, Medîm,” chided King Remlia. “He holds tremendous sway in our allied nation.”

“All right, all right.”

Oof, politicians have it rough. Definitely don’t wanna mess with that, or I’ll have bigger problems than the dungeon to worry about. Better finish up the work in front of me before anything else.

“Pardon me, Your Majesty, but I must ask you to refrain from drinking any alcohol for the time being. It’s one of the most significant causes of your illness. If you feel the need for something sweet, try to make do with raisins. And if you’ll forgive the impertinent suggestion, I’d advise you add beastfolk bread and other such baked goods made with unrefined flour to your diet, as it will do wonders for your health. The illness afflicting you is, in essence, a disease of indulgence. You should recover as long as you make a concerted effort to keep your sustenance a little more modest.” The people of this world didn’t have any idea what vitamins were to begin with, so I didn’t even touch that part. “Also, you may find this unpleasant, but I strongly recommend you have some pork as well.”

“.....I’ll consider it,” he begrudgingly conceded, every muscle in his face betraying how deeply he loathed the idea. I quickly read him a list of other thiamine-rich foods I suggested.

“I apologize for the wait, Your Majesty.” Lanceil carried a fresh, much tastier-looking bowl of soup to the king. I guess you can pour love into anything—even instant ramen.

“In that case, my liege, allow me to test it for—”

“Silence, Medîm,” the king cut Pops off, slapping his hand away.

“Souya, I might’ve asked sooner, but what exactly is this dish?”

In response to his question, I answered, “It’s a soup called ramen which first originated in a country called China. In the hundred years or so since it first arrived in my country, it’s been adapted in such a unique way that when people from its homeland taste our version now, they say, ‘This isn’t Chinese, is it?’ But leave the noodles too long and they’ll expand, so please go ahead.” With that brief explanation, I urged him to start his meal.

King Remlia willed his shaking hands to be still and began with a spoonful of the broth. A curious expression crossed his face, and a moment later he put his utensil to work in earnest, digging into the noodles as well. Since he had a hard time slurping them up, he slowly and gracefully carried them to his mouth instead. The king said not a word. Lanceil stole anxious glances at me. We watched overprotectively as he solemnly consumed his bowl. About six minutes later, “Your Highness, it’s best not to finish all the broth,” I warned.

“That so?” He ignored me. Unlike Pops, he elegantly scooped up every last bit of the broth rather than lift the entire dish.

“My. Someone bring me an ale,” he barked.

“No alcohol, remember? Someone bring him some black bean tea,” I overruled him. One of the maids bowed and excused herself from the room.

“Come now, Souya. Did you not say I’ll recover if I have enough of this? Then it stands to reason that I should be able to drink some ale if I eat even more, right?”

“That’s not how this works.” That *It’s low calorie so I can have more no problem* reasoning wouldn’t slide with me.

“It’s not, is it?” The king looked rather meek.

“Then I’ll have it in your stead,” offered Pops. “Someone, an ale.”

“Not happening.”

“Why not?”

At least pretend to be considerate, will you?

[43RD DAY]

“Can you believe this, Ghatt? Yaya took *thirty* cups of my ramen to give to the king! And he didn’t even charge for them!”

“Now hang on, those weren’t yours, were they?”

“What’s Yaya’s is mine!”

“Now if that isn’t some convenient logic.”

And so went the conversation between the merman in shades and Éa as they stomped in place. Beneath their feet was a blue tarp stretched over a plastic bag filled with flour, plus water and salt for kneading it. A wooden board lay under both.

Stomp, stomp, they went. *Stomp, stomp. Stomp, stomp. Stomp, stomp.*

Watching them work out of the corner of my eye, I continued my fierce battle with the fryer. It had already bested me once, so I steeled myself to give it all I had. I put some cold water and mayonnaise into a bowl, mixed it well, added flour, and roughly worked that in until the mixture was clumpy. With that, the breadding was complete.

Now then, I thought, scowling at the large, oil-filled pot that stood bubbling over an open flame.

“Machina, what’s the temp on the oil?”

“It’s perfectly heated at one hundred and eighty degrees Celsius,” came the response from the cylindrical machine, aka Repaired Machina Unit, a sixth-generation artificial intelligence robot originally designed for space exploration. What might appear to the random observer as nothing more than a white barrel was in fact the pinnacle of scientific advancement. Only thing was, I’d apparently done such an awful job fixing her up that she could no longer recall her own model number, so I’d appended the *Repaired* for convenience’s sake. It seemed like she was restoring her functions every chance she got.

“Great. Let’s do this.”

Setting that aside, I covered an onion in the breadding and dropped it into the oil. It sizzled nicely. Paying attention to the air bubbles that floated to the

surface, I strained to listen for any changes. As soon as the sizzling took on a higher tone, about forty seconds in, I lifted it out of the pot.

“How’s it look?” I asked Machina.

“Woow, that looks so tasty. Good job on the frying, Mr. Souya.”

“It’s all in the sounds. I’ve learned to hear how the sizzles change once it’s heated all the way through. By the way, how many points would you give it?”

“Thirty-five out of a hundred.” *Damn, that’s low.*

I fried a whole load of these thirty-five-point onions, lining them up on a clean cloth as I went. Next up, thinly sliced eggplant. These I let bob for a short while longer, just under a minute, before removing them from the pot.

“How about these?”

“Oh yes, wonderfully done. They’ve cooked all the way through.”

“And your score?”

“Twenty-eight points.” *That’s even worse!*

I mass-produced the twenty-eight-pointers and set them on the cloth. Next I tossed some watercress into the boiling pot. This proved rather challenging, but I gathered the separated pieces back up and somehow got them to stick together. You could eat these raw, so I pulled them out after thirty seconds.

“Machina, what about this one? The shape’s a bit funky, but—”

“Mr. Ghatt, Lady Éa, you can stop noow, that’s quite enooough.” *These didn’t even get a consolation compliment.*

While I finished frying the too-shabby-to-rate failures and adding them to the cloth, Machina removed the blue tarp and inspected the kneaded wheat.

“Excellent work. This will most certainly make some scrumptious dishes.”

“Wait, are you suuure? A merman had his webby feet all over it, you know.”

“Can that be right? An elf trampled all over it, you know.”

I scooped out the fried bits of loose breadding and gathered them all in a bowl. Next, left to my own devices, I turned to my real adversary. I dunked the

prepped shrimp in the breading, shaking it gently to get a thicker coat, then dropped one into the oil as a test. I poked at the still-soft breading with my chopsticks and pressed in any bits that looked close to breaking off. The shrimp sank and floated back to the surface; I kept a careful eye on it. After about a minute, I flipped it over, then watched some more. The bubbles rising to the surface shrank, and the sizzling sounded markedly more pronounced.

Now!

I swooped in and picked out the shrimp, its breaded coat now fully blossomed; its color was perfect. Onto the cloth went the little guy, a full mark in my book.

“Give it to me straight, Machina.”

“Oh, yes. Looks great,” came the perfunctory-sounding response. *You’re gonna hurt my feelings, you know?*

“Hmm, what do we have here?” A white hand reached over my shoulder, grabbed the shrimp, then quickly recoiled with it. “Ow! Hot! Mm, mm-mmm.”

Munching and crunching sounded right behind me. I tried to turn around, but the hands seized my head and stopped me. Once their grip relented, I looked back and saw a cat clinging to my leg. The golden-eyed, ash-gray cat resembled any other feline, but was in fact a fully fledged deity—my goddess.

“Not terrible,” she declared.

“Lady Mythlanica, steal any more while I’m cooking and you’ll get less on your dinner plate,” I warned her.

“I will not stand for such insolence from my disciples!”

“Ow, ouch!”

The tiny, tyrannical goddess ripped my pants by sharpening her claws on my leg. Meanwhile, Machina (horizontally) rolled over my way and slapped some kneaded dough on a cutting board. She folded and shaped the dough and, with a kitchen knife in one hand, divided it into equal pieces with exquisitely efficient and refined movements. Though obviously mechanical, her dexterous fingers evoked images of an expert artisan at work. She handled the dough with

calculated yet not entirely unfeeling precision that even conveyed a sense of appreciation for the materials she held. I'd sort of gotten those vibes before, but damn, this bot knew her stuff.

"Mr. Souya, for whom do you believe meals are made?"

"Huh? Well, the people who eat them, right?" Her philosophical question had come out of left field.

"Precisely. But people much prefer the seventy-point stews their mothers make over professionally prepared ninety-point equivalents. Cooking is, in essence, a subjective form of love. One cannot put a number on that."

Wha—? "What?" A bolt of lightning struck me—at least, that was the way I pictured it in my mind. Lady Mythlanica yelled, "Brace yourself!" and latched on to me again as I reeled. "How could I miss that?"



She's exactly right. With enough love, even instant ramen can become a delicacy. Wait, maybe that's just from the spices and seasonings. No—it's love. It's gotta be.

"I'm sorry, Machina. I'd lost sight of the fact that dishes are always perfect marks for the people who love them..... So what do you give this shrimp?"

"Twenty-one points." *Daaaaamn.*

Vowing I'd abandon all pride and redouble my efforts, I plugged away at frying the remaining heap of twenty-one-point shellfish. Before long, it was all done.

"Machina, I'm leaving this part to you."

"Roger!" She added the sliced pieces of dough to the boiling pot of water. I put Ghatt's portions into a crate and fixed it to an older drone model made for high-altitude observation; it looked much like a can of soda with propellers.

"Take it away."

"Okaaay." The drone flew up and up and soon became nothing more than a tiny speck.

"Bring it back down for me once it's cooled off enough."

"Yooou've got it!"

Now all that remained was the dipping sauce. I poured some soy sauce into another pot, dissolved granulated soup stock in that, and added a bit of mirin and sugar. Taste check—passed. I transferred the sauce into a small teapot before laying out our seasonings: grated ginger, roasted pine nuts, and pickled onions.

"Mr. Souya, they're all boiled!"

"Gotcha."

Grabbing a large multipurpose strainer I'd bought here, I left the kitchen with Machina, who was carrying the bubbling pot. We found a good spot and strained out the water, then shook it off a bit. After that, we headed back to camp and swished our creation in some cold water before divvying it up and

plating each person's share. I left the extra servings floating in the cool water.

The drone came back down. Knowing Ghatt couldn't eat anything hot, I double-checked the temperature: twelve degrees Celsius. Thanks to the cool air in the upper atmosphere that had instantly chilled it, all the fried pieces had stayed nice and crispy. Four days prior, Ghatt had almost given himself a third-degree burn trying to eat something I'd fried. Now he and Éa sat next to each other at the table. She could barely contain herself as she waited. As for me, I headed into the tent to wake Lana.

"Lunch is ready," I told her.

"*Yaaawn.*" She stared at me blankly, completely out of it. Lana always had a hard time waking up in the morning, but the battle had seemed extra arduous today. She lay lightly clothed in spandex shorts and a T-shirt, her plump bosom jostling with every move.

"If you're not hungry, I can put some aside for you. Would you like that? Do you need to sleep a bit more?" I leaned in close.

"Yeaaah," she answered drowsily, then wrapped her floppy arms around me, getting even closer.

"Wait, Mrs.—"

"Thank you sho much for eve...ry...thiing....." She trailed off into sleep.

It was almost too much happiness to handle—or hold! I had to move on, so I took my urge to slide my hands up her shirt and shoved it down, down, down!All the way down—and lay her to rest. As consolation, I did give her belly a little rub. This in no way meant I was a chicken. I was simply a courteous gentleman. I left the tent.

"Where's Lala?" asked Éa.

"She wanted to get some more sleep. D'you think using all her magic is affecting her rest?"

"Woow, sooo lazy. I swear," criticized the sister who was normally the lazier of the two.

Machina had already served Lana's portion. I'd promised to save her a plate,

but neither of the dishes in this meal stayed good for long. Same as always, I left Lady Mythlanica's serving in a separate tent for her. Just then—

“Well, well, what an unusual group we have here. I've seen more than most in my years, but I've never come across a merman, an elf, and a heim sitting down to share a meal.”

“Huh?”

—Pops appeared, this time on foot. I couldn't have told you when he'd gotten there. Maybe Machina hadn't alerted me since she knew he didn't pose a threat?

“Mr. Medîm, would you care to join us?”

“Oh, don't mind if I do. That's some unusual armor you've got there, young lady. Are you a dwarf? Well, not that it matters.” The locals referred to Machina as a dwarf. Apparently, the ones in this area wore similarly cylindrical armor.

“Perhaps it's best I leave?” offered Ghett.

“Don't even, Ghett. You own this land. If anyone's got a problem with you, *they* can split,” insisted Éa, vetoing his polite attempt to avoid conflict.

Pops, taking his own seat at the table, agreed. “Lord Merman, I'd be happy to excuse myself if my presence makes you uncomfortable. I will take my share with me, though.”

“Then you might as well have it here.”

The three seemed to reach an accord, so we moved on to the main event.

“So what is this?” Pops asked.

“Right, allow me to provide a little background on the dishes we have before us today.”

“Make it quick!” Éa urged, driving a stake into my heart.

“I'd noticed there aren't many noodle dishes available around here, so I tried my hand at homemade udon made from water, salt, and wheat—all-purpose flour. We mixed all the ingredients together, trod on and kneaded the dough into strips, then boiled those. I've rinsed them in cool water, so they shouldn't

be too hot. Éa and Ghett kindly lent us a foot.”

“It was actually pretty fun,” remarked Ghett.

“You had your feet on these?”

“Yes, but don’t worry, Pops. We made sure to put a protective sheet in between, so it’s entirely hygienic,” I assured him.

“That right? I mean, not that it’d bother me.” *We’re not making wine here. No way I’d let bare feet touch this.*

“Dip the noodles about halfway into this sauce before you eat them,” I explained. “If you want to try the seasonings, add a little at a time so you can enjoy the subtle changes in flavor.” Machina poured the dipping sauce into little bowls and passed them around.

“Lastly, we have tempura, a deep-fried dish battered in a solution of water and flour. As for varieties, we have onion, eggplant, elven toothbrushing cabbage—watercress—and shrimp from the Maudubaffle Ocean. The vegetables are incredibly fresh, delivered straight from the farm today, and the shrimp which Ghett caught first thing this morning are a true delicacy. Though deceptively simple, this dish requires tremendous practice to master; it takes at least ten years to even reach the starting line. From there, it’s practice and training until the day you die.”

(Cut for brevity.)

“Unfortunately, I do not have the skills to come close to replicating the true taste of tempura. Although I did my best, I can’t say my work would earn a passing grade. Nevertheless! I assure you that the flavor will not leave you wanting. And how could it, with such high-quality ingredients?! The tempura you can enjoy with simply a little salt or dip it in the sauce to indulge in a little more flavor. Speaking of which, tempura has a long and storied history. It came to my country from Portugal together with importation of steel and—”

“““Hurry up and let us eat already!””” the three protested in unison, cutting my explanation short.

“Then without further ado, please enjoy your meal today of chilled udon noodles and tempura.”

The three diners rushed through their prayers and took their forks in hand. Machina went around serving everyone tea. First up, the tempura.

“What in the divine deeps is this?! Such crispiness, such crunch,” marveled Ghatt. *No burns, huh? I’m glad.*

“Yaya, you’ve gotten better at this,” declared Éa, both satisfied & bragging.

“Hmm, not too oily for a deep-fried dish. This breading and its technique raise so many questions. It goes great with salt,” remarked Pops as he took a crisp, crunchy bite of the tempura.

I heard a *slurp*; Éa had dug into the udon. Aghast, the middle-aged man nearly dropped his jaw at the sight.

“Whoooa, it’s so nice and chewy! I think I could eat this forever.”

“Princess Éa, this may be rather impertinent coming from a lowly adventurer such as myself, but that surely cannot be the most refined way to eat this meal, can it?” Pops pointed out. Éa *was* technically an elven princess. Turned out slurping your noodles didn’t exactly count as good manners here.

“But this is how they eat it where Yaya’s from,” she insisted. “I saw it myself.” In a movie, that is.

“I see.” Ghatt nodded before taking a superb slurp of his own. The udon slipped into his mouth; he chewed it thoughtfully. “Hmm, is this the sauce? Or the technique? The aromas and tastes seem to hit differently than usual.”

“You get it, don’t you, Ghatt? Ramen tastes amaaazing if you eat it this way, too,” agreed Éa.

After what looked like some deep consideration, Pops dipped his noodles all the way into the sauce and slurped them up in one go. “Hmm, this texture is almost like condensed soft bread. It slips nicely down the throat—not hard, exactly, yet satisfying to munch. Did you use fermented beans in the broth, by any chance?”

“Oh, can you taste it?” I responded, stunned he could point that out.

“Mellum had me try something similar once before, though it tasted like shit compared to this.” *Who was that again?* I thought, wracking my brain, when—

“Wait, Medîm, you know that jerk?”

—Éa asked, her voice drenched in disgust, and I realized he was her and Lana’s father.

“We were in the same party for a time. It was me, the king, Lanceil’s mother, Mellum, and his—” Pops mumbled the last bit so I couldn’t catch what he said.

“I didn’t know he was an adventurer.”

“Indeed. He had great skill with the blade, rare for an elf. In the end, I never once managed to best him.”

“Hmph. Not that I care.”

Pops had stepped on a land mine. He shut his mouth and focused on the food in front of him. Then, finally, I got to take my first bite as well.

“Thank you for this meal,” I said as grace, then slurped up a few noodles. The consistency wasn’t half-bad, and I didn’t mind the chewiness. I went a little heavy on the ginger and took another taste. *Yummm, now, this is what I’m talking about.*

For my first tempura piece I went with an onion, dipping it in the udon sauce before taking a bite. The crispy, thin layer of breading complemented the onion’s natural sweetness perfectly. Wasting no time, I took another slurp of the noodles. I started a one-two-punch tempo of tempura, udon, tempura, udon. Little by little, I added more spices to the dipping sauce, enjoying the progression in taste.

Éa and Ghett moved on to their second helpings of udon. Pops chowed down on his own helping, refusing to fall far behind. I saved the shrimp for last. The plump meat exploded as I took a bite with a *crunch*. If you asked me, this deserved a hundred points. And so the slurping of noodles rang out under the Otherworldly sky.

Anyway—

“So what did you come by for?” I asked Pop after we’d finished lunch and cleaned up all the dishes. Ghett had gone home, and Éa had headed to town to hang out with Bel and Shuna. Pops stayed behind at camp and now took puffs

from a golden, expensive-looking pipe.

“I’ve been waiting on someone, too, but they’re sure taking their sweet time.”

“Okaaay.” I had no idea what he was talking about.

Without much else to do, I joined Pops at the table. Lady Mythlanica hopped onto my lap with a *meow*. I scratched her forehead and around her neck, entertaining myself by pressing the squishy pads of her paws to push her nails in and out. My goddess doubled as a pet to cuddle and a great tool for killing time.

“By the way, the king’s feeling better now,” Pops informed me.

“That’s great to hear.”

“He picked up his sword this morning for the first time in a while and set to retraining the prince. I tell ya, he’s not the king of the adventurers for nothing. His blade looked as indomitable as ever.”

“Wait, he can’t have recovered that quickly, can he?”

Is beriberi something you can get over that easily? You just can’t break the people here; they’ve got way too many off-the-wall abilities. Magic probably sped things along, too. Maybe comparing his recovery against the standards of modern knowledge doesn’t make much sense.

“So about your reward,” Pops started.

“Reward?” A reward, huh? Well, I had saved the king’s life, after all. I guess it was only fitting.

“Tell me if there’s something in particular you want, and I’ll pass on the message.”

“Something I want?” Money. Useful items. Or maybe a house with a big kitchen. Land? And since I’m in a fantastical dimension and all, maybe a maid wouldn’t hurt, either. My list went on far too long to choose from.

“Oh!” I remembered our most pressing issue. “Pops, is there any way to quickly refill your ryvius?”

“Aye, there sure is.” I’d landed on the solution a lot more smoothly than

expected. I guess it never hurts to ask. “If that’s what you’re after, take this.”

“Oh?”

Pops handed me a gold piece hanging from a chain. Through my association with the different trade groups, I’d gotten a pretty good look at most of the coins around these parts, but I’d never seen this kind before. It was engraved with a design resembling a kind of wheel? Necklace?

“You’ve met the constable before, right?” asked Pops.

“Yes, just after I came here.”

“There’s this shop called the Goddesses of Slumber and Fertility Parlor straight behind his post. Wear this on your left hand and pay it a visit.” I wanted to get more information, but a carriage arrived, so I lost my chance. “There it is.”

Pops stood up, grabbed a few sacks from the carriage, and put them down in camp. They looked like bags of flour. I counted one, two, three of them. “Sorry, what are these?” I asked.

“Sacks of sugar.” He cleared his throat and in a dignified tone announced, “By imperial decree of His Majesty the King, Otherworlder, you are to make something to aid in His Highness’s recovery.”

“No thanks.” I met his matter-of-fact declaration with an equally blunt response.

“Now hang on, this is technically a royal command, you know. You can’t just turn those down. I really don’t want to have to kill you.”

“Come on, that’s what chefs do, not adventurers!” I was having a hard enough time trying to handle all the non-dungeon-related issues on my plate already. *I’ll be damned if I take on any more trouble!*

“You’ve really only got yourself to blame here. You went and made something tastier, not to mention healthier, than what the palace chefs prepare. People were bound to expect more outta you. Did you know that Remlia let three of his cooks go after that?”

“I—I don’t give a craaaap! I already gave him the ramen, so he should just

make do with thaaaaaat!”

“I’m right there with you, but I’m afraid the king isn’t. ‘Medîm, I always crave something sweet after a salty, spicy meal. I’ve grown tired of raisins. Have Souya make me something.’ So do what he ordered and do it well. I’ve got dungeon business to attend to. I don’t have time to waste running every little errand. That bald old fart, taking advantage of a good friend’s concern.”

“You said ‘bald old fart’! You called His Majesty a ‘bald old fart’!” *I’ll get that on tape and play it for him! You’re goin’ down with me!*

“Aye, that I did. And I’ll say it again. Bald. Bald old fart! I may be the Father of Adventurers, but no way in hell am I the king’s guardian.” The stress of his daily work was starting to get Pops heated up, so I took the hint and tried cooling things down.

“Seriously, though, I’ve got my next expedition coming up. I don’t have time to dote on him.” Dealing with a life-threatening situation was one thing, but I wasn’t about to spend my days indulging King Remlia’s every whim. Plus, I got the feeling that if I gave in here, I’d never see the end of it. Next thing I knew this’d be *The Otherworlder, Cooking outside the Dungeon*.

“Hmm, I see. Fair point. It does seem rather harsh to delay an adventurer’s expeditions for that,” he conceded, then fell into thought. After a little while, he made a proposal. “Would you do it for a map? I can give you one covering the tenth-through-twelfth floors.”

“Seriously?!”

The unbelievable counteroffer left me astonished. Dungeon maps never came cheap, but they could reach truly astronomical prices depending on their accuracy and reliability. To put things into perspective, a verified chart of every nook and cranny of the fifth through the tenth floors cost five hundred gold pieces.

Maps were a double-edged sword, though. If people sold them willy-nilly, they’d get passed around, they’d become obsolete, and they could even threaten our very existences as adventurers. The dungeon required a certain amount of human casualties to function as it did. No one could predict what calamities the unbalanced ecosystem would produce if you destroyed that

delicate chain in the name of efficient exploration.

It was an unwritten rule that maps could only be sold to other adventurers. Apparently, someone once broke that rule and sold a chart to a merchant, only for them both to show up floating in the river the next day. The Guildmaster flashed before my eyes for some reason, a dark smile on his irritatingly adorable face.

“It’s a relatively trustworthy diagram. But we keep this between us, you hear? Otherwise, it might tarnish my integrity.”

“Is there any way you can make that go down to the thirteenth floor?” I countered. I’d been keeping an ace up my sleeve. Reaching into my pocket, I let Pops catch a glimpse of a single bird feather. Believe it or not, it worked as a calling card for a goddess who could guarantee the equity of any trade. I was being asked to provide instant ramen, impossible to make in this realm, and a thiamine-rich dessert recipe also unavailable in this region. Who knew how valuable they could turn out to be in a fairly arbitrated negotiation?

“.....Fine, but only to the thirteenth floor. I’ll bring it over tomorrow. Make sure you get those sweets ready.”

All right! Talk about a stroke of luck. I’ll have to get Isolla to scan it and work out a route for us. Maybe this next dungeon dive will go according to plan—though probably still not as easy as pie.



I strode through the city after dark, an ominous, chaotic place that rang with cries of anger and fear. Adept adventurers did theoretically patrol the area to keep the peace, but once they downed a few drinks you could hardly tell them apart from your run-of-the-mill thugs.

The sun had long set, yet people still lingered, overcome with a feverish heat. Ladies transformed under the cover of night like Cinderella, and men hunted for their prey like starving animals, a savage glint in their eyes. Except, according to my goddess, the women here turned not into princesses but into demons. If I wanted to see the light of day again and avoid having all my vitality drained from me until I became an empty husk, I’d do well to keep my pants on and

keep walking, she'd warned. Thick, dank smells of sex and death filled the air. Danger seemed to lurk around every corner. Goddess, save me.

I made it to the shop Pops had told me about, the Goddesses of Slumber and Fertility Parlor. It looked like a refined mansion and gave off high-class vibes, probably all part of the package it sold. You couldn't see anything from outside. Not a single employee stood out in front trying to entice customers.

I watched about five people enter the establishment, all elite adventurers. One of them even bore a Lumileux steel blade. Named after one of the six gods who comprised Windovnickel, God of Adventurers, this steel was both incredibly sharp and incredibly expensive. A single knife made of the stuff went for eight hundred gold pieces. It boggled the mind to imagine how much a full longsword would cost. But now wasn't the time to lose myself in thought.

"This has got to be a brothel, right?" There was no mistaking it. I'd made the right call to come and check it out for myself first. Not that I held any prejudices against sex work, but it just wasn't the sort of place one should bring a princess, even if she no longer held her title. Had Pops been trying to trick me?

"Oh, it's you," came a voice out of nowhere. It belonged to a beastmaid with medium-length chestnut hair, floppy ears sprouting from the top of her head, and a lean figure covered with what was basically underwear, which left a clear view of her roundish tail and small behind. Despite the alluring outfit, her slightly downward-slanted eyes gave her an innocent look. I knew her from somewhere. We'd definitely met before; I just couldn't remember where. Her name hung on the tip of my tongue. She carried a few grocery bags in her arms. Maybe she was on her way back from shopping for dinner?

"Don't tell me you're looking for someone here of all places, are you?" she asked. "Oh? ...My, aren't you something. You haven't been an adventurer for more than a few days, and yet you've already come this far." She grabbed my left hand, which was where I'd hung the chain with the gold coin as instructed. "Perfect timing. She just happened to come back to work today after a bit of a break."

Huh? Who? I wanted to inquire, but before I could get the words out, she tugged me forward as the doors of the shop opened for us. The sweet fragrance

of perfume mingled with wisps of tobacco smoke swirling through the air beneath the faint glow of emiluminite. Erotically lit naked figures stretched out in the hall before us. Some lounged on the sofas, while others trained their feverish gazes on me. A few used their free moments to enjoy some skin-on-skin action. I saw beastfolk, heims, elves, and people of races I couldn't even recognize. Man or woman, they all had two things in common: their collars and their beauty.

A well-dressed, intimidating dude stepped in front of me, blocking my entry as I stood there dumbfounded. As soon as my female companion drew his attention to the chain on my left hand, he broke into a genial smile. He welcomed me in and let the woman continue guiding me. She whisked me away to a room on the second floor and left me all alone.

The chamber's furnishings felt a little too extravagant, but maybe that was the mood they were going for. I unslung the bow from my back and rested it against the bed, then did the same with the quiver at my waist, almost seamlessly making myself at home. Peeking beneath the bed, I found chains and shackles attached to each corner post. A quick look in the dresser drawers revealed several *spectacular items* made of wood or metal. After a little more digging around, I discovered perfumes and candles, whips and gags, beaded strings, restraints, and a wide variety of other toys.

Wait a second.

".....?!" Crap, what do I do?

I'd known exactly what was going on this whole time, but an odd sense of anticipation caused me to freeze. Immediately, I snapped back to my senses. *Shit, this is bad. I gotta get outta here.*

I opened the window only to find cast iron bars. Before I could slink out the door, someone else entered.

"Thank you so much for your patience," she said, bowing politely. A feline beastmaid, she had supple arms and lithe legs, an ever-so-soft-looking midriff and breasts, long, billowing golden hair, beautifully pointed ears, and a full plume tail. In terms of cat breeds, she probably came closest to a Somali. Her countenance exuded a natural charm, along with a touch of youthfulness. Thin

silk garments meant not to cover but to accentuate her body were draped over her frame. And, of course, she wore a collar.

“Oh, meow, Souya!” And I knew exactly who she was.

“Tutu, what’re you doing?!”

“What do you mean? I’m working.”

“Seriously?!”

My mind reeled at this encounter that was akin to running into a classmate at a sex shop. Not that that had ever happened to me, but I could imagine it felt this way.

“Whoops, I’m such a bad kitty.” Tutu cleared her throat once and began speaking in a completely different tone. “Tonight, I am your dream, your desires incarnate, your servant of the flesh, your bountiful *catch*.”

She reached out and ran her fingers through my hair. I shuffled backward under the pressure of her approach until I fell onto the bed. The tips of her golden hair tickled my neck. Sinuous as a leopard, she straddled me. My eyes were glued to her warm, lustrous skin.

“O Holy Lowomen, Goddess of Slumber, and Gastolfo, Goddess of Fertility, I raise my prayers to you both. May your rejuvenating blood run through my fleeting master, manifest your roving magic, and bind to me as one.”

Tutu took the ryvius hanging from my neck and pressed her lips to the vials. *Shit*, I thought, but it was too late. Our lips met. Unable to grasp the situation and overcome with nerves and panic as I was, every inch of my body hardened. Her tongue and hands caressed each and every knot as if to work them free.

Snap. Something within me broke. I lost all power of rational thought.

“Mmm, *ngh!*” A sultry moan escaped her lips. I lifted her up without thinking. Our bodies pressed together, skin to skin, our hot breath mingling. Sweet like candy, we embraced, and I nibbled a taste.

“Souya, wai—wait. *Ahn*, ah! Just, a second. Hang on just a minute, meow.” Tutu peeled me off of her. The heat fizzled. Drips of logical reasoning came back to me.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAH! What?! What was I doing?! I'm—! I'm a married man, even if it's just for show. Wait, that makes it okay, though, right? Hmm? Is this allowed? Or is it wrong? Can't be good, right?

Utterly discombobulated, I broke out into a weird little jig sort of like a robot—if that robot were broken.

“Oh, it went up more than I'd thought. Looks like meow and you have some good chemistry.”

“Huh?”

Tutu shook my ryvius gently in her hand.

What? That's strange.

I'd only had about a thumb's worth of vitality in there, but it now measured on par with a rearguard adventurer's. Forget about restoring whatever I had to begin with; was it possible to increase my maximum levels?

“Sorry, Tutu. What do you mean?”

“Huh? You mean you came all this way, and you don't even know? This parlor specializes in serving adventurers. Lowomen disciples like meow can share their ryvius with others. The effects usually last about two days, though that depends on the person. Some people have a better connection than others, too, so you should try and see for yourself first.”

“Does it work on external magic, too?” I pictured Tutu tangled up in Lana and, though I hate to admit it, got very turned on.

“Afraid not. I mean, the external magic you use to cast spells and the internal magic for your vitality are two totally different things, you meow.”

Shiiit. I didn't explain the problem right. This is all my fault for not getting all the important details straight. But c'mon, Pops, you shoulda warned me! You witnessed us exchange our vows and become husband and wife. If you'd have told me exactly what kinda place you were sending me to, I.....wouldn't have come here...or so I'd like to believe.

“What do you think, Souya? We can keep going. You're also allowed to switch partners up to three times. But once you switch, you can't go back, so choose

veeeery carefully, meow.”

“Hang—hang on.” I held up my hands in a time-out T. There was too much I needed to process. Unaware of the bedlam raging within me, Tutu took my hands and placed them on her breasts. Though a bit on the smaller side, they fit perfectly in the palms of my hands and felt nice and plump. As a matter of natural instinct, humans will automatically test the softness of anything supple they get hold of. I gave them a little squeeze.

“Meeow. ♪”

As I became hooked by her sweet murmur, one of my hands slid down to her waist. I gently drew her closer; she climbed on my lap. Her hips grew hot and moist where they met my thighs, and she ran her red tongue over her lips. She stared at me with an impossibly coquettish, provocative, seductive expression. Our lips met once more, and all thought and reason within me vanished without a trace.

Then...the wall broke.

And I’m not being metaphorical here—it literally burst open. The deafening roar and crash made me think we were under attack. It took me a little time to put it all together, but I eventually realized the man from reception had burst through the wall and into our room. I’d figured out the “what” but still had no clue about the “why.” A butt-naked man stood in the room next to ours.

“Long-ears just won’t do. Their bones snap like a rabbit’s. Ohhh, that beastmaid over there looks much better.” The intruder looked like one of those ancient buffs chiseled from stone. An elf crouched on the ground behind him. He grabbed her by the hair and dragged her toward me.

“You, switch with me,” he demanded, then hurled the elf at me. I tried to leap into action, but with Tutu clutching my leg in fear, I couldn’t move. I heard a dull *thud*; the elf hit her head on one of the bedposts and crumpled. Now he wasn’t the only one who was pissed off.

“Oh-ho.” The man voiced his amusement.

In a split second, I’d picked up my bow and nocked an arrow. Wooden-shafted ammunition from this lycan bow could easily pierce straight through a

human skull; the weighted arrow I now had trained on him could wrench off an arm or leg without difficulty.

“Apologize to this lady now. I want to see your goddamn head wipe the floor. Do that, and I’ll let you off with only one arrow in your ass.”

“Such big talk from such a little knave.”

That was all I needed. I released my shot. Sparks flew. The arrow was deflected and stabbed straight into the ceiling. I hadn’t been shooting to kill, but I hadn’t held back, either. The man gripped a huge sword in his left hand. But wait, he hadn’t been the one to swing it to divert my arrow. Though I couldn’t sense any other enemies around, someone must have thrown the blade and redirected the arrow’s trajectory.

“I suppose a little bloodshed before I get to the girl might be exciting in its own way,” he mused, casually stepping closer. I already had my next arrow nocked, but if this missed, I’d be shit out of luck. Since I didn’t know how he’d escaped my last shot, I decided it’d be better to go for broke at point-blank range instead of letting this one go too soon. The instant he lifted his sword, I’d release it straight at his forehead.

Generously speaking, maybe we were evenly matched? He seemed to realize it, too, so he raised his lips in a feral smile. I grinned back, teeth bared. I didn’t give a damn who he was. We’d pointed our weapons at each other. Now we had only two options: kill or be killed. People who lacked that kind of determination never amounted to anything. That was all it came down to.

The distance between us shrank. Arrow met blade and—

“Werner!” yelled another man as he stole into the room, cutting our duel short. Clad in a knight’s armor, he had closely cropped hair and a scar running over his lips. He was built like a boulder, with neck and limbs so thick it strained credulity to call him a heim. In a nutshell, he was a beat-up, boorish thirtysomething warrior. The design emblazoned on his armor tugged at my memory.

He continued his booming rebuke. “This gallivanting is no way for a hero of St. Lillideas to behave! A mere scratch on your person here would tarnish your honor beyond repair! If it’s blood you wish to see, say the word and I shall put

you through a most grueling grind until morning light!”

“*Tch.*” The naked man clicked his tongue and tapped his sword against his shoulder. Evidently he’d given up on the fight. A gaggle of people started crowding around.

“You there, adventurer. For your troubles,” grunted the armored man as he handed me a rather hefty satchel full of gold coins.

A member of the parlor’s staff guided Tutu and me to another room. Still trembling with fear, she clung to my arm, her bushy tail fully puffed up. In this room, we found the owner of the establishment. A terrifying beauty of inscrutable age, she wore a dress with a plunging neckline and had long, curly locks. The dazzling assortment of precious metals and jewels adorning her body probably accounted for a mere fraction of her total assets.

“Mr. Otherworlder, I am ashamed of the atrocious reception we have given you, an invited guest. By all rights, our beauties should be the ones ensuring our clients’ safety, and yet this little one allowed you to protect her. I assure you she will be severely disciplined,” she hissed. “—Tutu.”

The instant the proprietor called her name, the beastmaid sprang away from me. “I-I’m terribly sorry, ma’am.” Her tail shriveled and sank.

“While admittedly not the most refined compensation, please feel free to request as many attendants as you’d like for the rest of the night—on the house.”

“Thank you. I appreciate the offer, but I’ll have to decline. Tutu is more than enough for me. Unfortunately, I’ve lost the desire to continue tonight and will take my leave. But I’ll be back another day.”

I gave Tutu a pat on the head to calm her tears, left a few gold coins with the proprietor for the injured elf, and exited the room. Then, stifling my regret, I exited the parlor doors. The raucous clamor of the city’s nightlife washed over me as I gulped down a deep breath of the evening air and then released a long, heavy sigh.

That was a close one. Too close.

That was probably the most dangerous situation I’d faced in this dimension,

even more dangerous than the time all my weapons had gotten stolen. Careless and idiotic, I'd almost drowned in my lust. I couldn't face Lana now; I couldn't even face the other ladies in my party.

What the hell am I doing?

"Haah," I sighed. Still, it had all worked out. I'd made it through the ordeal by the skin of my teeth. But if that's all that's keeping you alive, you're pretty much as good as dead, right? *It's fine, what matters is you're okay*, I told myself over and over.

I'm safe now. Right, I should get Lana a present and head home. That'll definitely make Éa jealous, though, so let's make that two presents. What should I get?

"Oh, Souya."

"Ah, it's Sou."

I bumped into two of the last people I'd have hoped to see: Shuna and Bel. They held heaps of foodstuffs in their arms.

"H-hey, you two," I stammered. "You didn't by any chance.....see that, did you?"

Pure innocence in his eyes, Shuna responded, "Huh? See what? You comin' outta that mansion? Yeah, we did. Actually, Tutu said she worked here. What kinda shop is it?"

Right. They're friends with her. Shit, my legs are starting to buckle.

".....Hmmp." Bel—no, Madame Beltriche—leaned back and gave me a conspicuous once-over. "Hmmp....." What was she trying to get at?

"Well, you are just a man. I get it, I'm no kid."

"Bel, what is thi—"

"Shunie, run along home without me," she cut him off. "I need to talk to Sou about something." She dumped all her bags into his arms.

"Agh! It's heavy! Too heavy!"

"You're a man, aren't you?! Just think of it as training and get goin'!"

“Wh-why’re you so pissed?” Crumbling under the terrifying force behind Bel’s words, Shuna ran off.

Bel jerked her head as if throwing down a challenge to meet her outside the gym after school. We slipped into an abandoned back alley.

“I’m begging you, please don’t tell Lana,” I pleaded. I’d never said anything more pathetic.

“So I can tell Éa?”

“Let me rephrase: Please just keep this between us.”

“I guess you must feel *some* remorse for Lana’s name to be the first thing to come out of your mouth.” *Yes, ma’am. My heart could keel over at any minute from all the guilt.*

“Would you be open to hearing my excuse?”

“Be my guest.” Her eyes were full of suspicion.

“Lana’s magic just wouldn’t recover, so when I asked Pops if he knew a way to restore it, he told me to come here. But I couldn’t send her to some random place I didn’t know anything about, so I decided to come check it out first. Then, lo and behold, Tutu popped up.”

“You did it with *her* of all people?!”

“Umm.” *Should I tell her? Do I even have a choice? I don’t want to lie to my party members.* “J-just by mouth.”

“BY MOUTH?!”

“Ah, no, I mean, mouth to mouth. Like, kiss-kiss.”

Bel flushed bright red; maybe she’d pictured it. What in all the worlds was I telling to such an impressionable young girl?

“And after that?”

“Huh?”

“What happened next?!” For some reason, the corners of her mouth had pricked up into a smirk.

“I mean, nothing really.”

“Don’t lie to me! You can’t expect me to believe a man and a woman are gonna stop at a kiss!” An excellent point.

“The guest in the room next to ours started some trouble and roped me into it, so I left. The end.”

“Aw, maaan.” She sounded disappointed. *You’ve got a pretty dirty mind, don’t ya?* “But I guess that makes sense. It sounds very you. Would you have gone all the way if that brawl hadn’t broken out?”

“Ha-ha! No way,” I lied. I’d completely lost myself to desire. “So there you have it—nothing happened.”

“Nothing, huh?” I couldn’t read her expression for the life of me.

“Please, Bel. I’ll do anything, so don’t tell the others. This was all just a series of misunderstandings and random coincidences. I never meant to be unfaithful to my wife.”

Unfaithful: That’s what they called you when you messed around with anyone other than your spouse. Still, I wasn’t sure if it applied to a fake marriage, much less one that hadn’t *gone anywhere yet*.

I sound super lame and weaselly, don’t I?

“Anything, you say?”

“I mean, anything I could theoretically do.” For some reason or another, I trusted Bel. We’d held each other’s lives in our hands. She would never do anything to break our party up or request something unreasonable.

“All right, then breakfast is on you tomorrow. Can I go to your campsite?”

“Sure, no problem. I’ll whip up something extra special.”

“Yaaay!” My heart warmed so at the sight of her bouncing with excitement, I completely let my guard down.

“Oh, and just one more thing,” she whispered. Who knows what possessed her, but she caught my face between her hands, stood up on tiptoe, and—lightly touched her lips to mine.

“Heh-heh-heh, we smooched.”

I grinned like a young boy. My crimson cheeks burned so brightly, not even the dark of night could conceal them. The moil behind me sounded even more raucous than usual.

I think I might be going to hell. I bet it's like a witch's cauldron.

[44TH DAY]

A wandering minstrel once surveyed one hundred disbanded parties about what had caused them to break up. Coming in at fifth place: money. More specifically, arguments over how to divvy it up, attempts to hoard treasure, refusing to pay the Guild its due, and debt. People often say, “Adventurers are nothing if not free.” That doesn’t mean they can just refuse to make good on their debts, though.

Number four: racial discrimination. This was an extremely delicate issue. For the most part, people avoided teaming up with members of races they didn’t mesh well with from the get-go, but sometimes necessity left them with no choice but to collaborate with other parties, work with clients, or get help during an expedition from someone of a different race. In those situations, there were countless factors that could lead to trouble.

Heims often carried themselves like pretentious overlords; elves looked down on anyone of non-elven blood; dwarves, consummate artisans that they were, stubbornly refused to compromise. All of these “manfolk” treated beastfolk like trash. This discriminatory behavior hadn’t developed overnight; it had a long history. Although it absolutely infuriated me, I wasn’t about to try to change anything. Evil as it was, the custom was a part of this dimension. I had no right to interfere.

Number three: internal disagreements about the party’s direction. (What do they think they are, rock bands?)

Number two: death. The better the group, the more it functioned like a well-oiled machine. Lose even one cog and the whole thing went kaput. In 90 percent of parties that had two or more members expire, the surviving members called it quits and went their separate ways. Nothing is harder than filling the void left behind after losing someone. Maybe that was why

adventurers formed such strong bonds.

And coming in strong at number one: romantic relationships. Coed parties were five times more likely to fall apart than those of a single sex. That likelihood doubled if there were female elves or beastmaids in its ranks. Indecisive leaders, men in particular, doubled that risk further still. So for a group with members close in age, a married couple, and a younger sister-in-law, the possibility of disbandment grew bigger and bigger and—

“.....”

“And that concludes the results of the survey conducted by a minstrel and compiled by yours truly,” reported Isolla. That last dig was definitely *not* on the survey. “Squad Member Souya, we have a saying in my country that goes, ‘Don’t tell anyone at trial about our relations.’”

“Yeah, that’s the second time you’ve said it.” The quote came from a president who’d dipped his fingers in a college intern’s honeypot.

“Pursuing issues of ethical morality does not fall under my professional purview. However, if you would allow me to provide my personal opinion—cheaters are the scum of the earth.”

“You had eyes on me the whole time, didn’t you? You can back me up and prove my explana—”

“I have a proposal. In order to prevent any further misunderstandings, I suggest we consolidate our terminology. Going forward, let’s use *ryvius* to refer to the energy which measures your vitality, and remove *internal magic* from our lexicons. The energy required to cast spells we will call *magic points*, or simply *magic*, and no longer refer to it as *external magic*. Does that sound reasonable?”

“Understood. Let’s go with that.” She hadn’t listened to a word that came out of my mouth.

I am your one and only official registered user in this world, you know. Ms. Isolla, you haven’t forgotten that little fact, have you?

“As a result of your relations with the local resident in question, your *ryvius* has increased to thirty-three. This is gradually dwindling as time passes, but

considering you usually only had ten to begin with, it's an extraordinary result. Additionally, we have found no evidence of any sexually transmitted diseases. Nevertheless, cheaters are scumbags. Absolute trash, Squad Member Souya. Scumbag Souya." I felt like a pincushion being stabbed to death. "That's all from me. See you in the dungeon."

She hung up. That pissed me off, so I called her back, but she ignored it.

"What did Isolla have to say?" Machina asked.

"Sh-she wanted to talk about last night."

"....."

"....."

An awkward silence fell between us. It was early morning; a light breeze caressed my cheek, the cool morning dew covered the ground, and the sun's gentle rays felt good on my skin. The roosters I'd pasture raised on the meadow squawked, "*Cock-a-doodle-doo-doo!*" Today felt like it would be a good day.

"Mr. Souya! I finished preparing that item you requested a while back!"

"Ohhh, you don't say!"

Reading the room, we switched to a different topic altogether. A domed stone oven stood right before me. It had been annexed to the camp's existing kitchen.

"This is amazing. Where'd you get all the stones and stuff?" The two-meter-wide oven and its foundation had taken a relatively large amount of materials to build, much more than you could find just by picking rocks up here and there.

"I discovered some ruins beneath the spot where we first landed after teleporting here and borrowed some from the walls and columns to build it," she explained. "I put the oven together rather quickly, but it should be structurally sound."

"Ruins?"

"Yes, from a dungeon similar in composition to the Tower of Legions. I found emiluminite there as well. Presumably, it's the dungeon Mistress Lana mentioned that allows your ryviuses to operate around the campsite."

“Makes sense.” *Did those ruins draw us to them with some sort of power? Maybe I should check them out next time I get a spare moment. If I ever do. But first, breakfast.*

“Machina, how about that other thing I asked for?”

“I’ve finished it, of course.” She opened her torso and took out a bowl filled with a white, sticky substance—fresh cream.

“Wooow, you actually did it!”

“I whipped some milk and butter together with a little magic.” The spellcraft in this dimension was pretty crazy, but the magic of science didn’t fall far behind.

“I put the vegetables you asked for in the pantry. Think you can handle the rest?”

“Heh-heh-heh, leave it to me. I’m a girl, after aaall. ♪ I can bake any dessert under the suuun. ♪”

I’d just come back from a trip to the farms, where I’d bought a bunch of unusual vegetables, plus a few dairy products, before they went to market. Now that we had an oven and all, I just had to give *that* a try. Machina got to work on the sweets; I rolled up my sleeves, too.

I took out the udon dough I’d prepped the night before, pulled it apart, rolled it up, pulled it apart and rolled it up, then flattened it out with a rolling pin and spread tomato sauce all over it. Next, I took out three varieties of Otherworldly cheese, then shredded and sprinkled them over the paste. With that, the base was done.

The first pie I kept simple and loaded with bacon; the second got potatoes and mayonnaise. I went a little extra on the third, topping it with eggplants, edamame, onions, tomatoes, and olives. That’s when Ghatt arrived, right on time.

“Now, what’s this about?” he pried, warily regarding the kiln.

“It’s our newest cooking appliance,” I told him.

“Frightful piece of work.” I could only imagine how terrifying this much fire

was to a merman. Speaking of mermen, his haul for the day: scallops and shrimp. *Ohhh yeah, baby!*

Quick as a flash, I prepared the shellfish. Ghatt took his customary seat and resumed his battle with a disentanglement puzzle. Machina slid her batter into the oven. I stepped away from breakfast prep for the moment and got to packing provisions for our expedition later in the day. As it would be a short reconnaissance trip, three meals per person would do. Plus, we'd get the map Pops had promised today, so I planned to fight any monsters that popped up just enough to get a feel for them before calling it a day.

My adventuring style ensured we took things slow and steady, cautiously. But even then, the dungeon could force us into situations beyond our comfort zones at any moment. That was why I always left room for error when planning.

A little under an hour later—

“Mr. Souya! It's perfect!”

“Ooh, nice, nice!”

—Machina let out a cheer.

“And this is?” Squinting against the heat emanating from the kiln, Ghatt took a few steps closer to the royal offering set atop a cutting board.

“A cheesecake. I tried this recipe with *zunda*, a sweet paste made from soybeans, mixed in. It shouldn't be too sweet and has a good amount of thiamine!” she explained, referring to the light green pastry sitting in a round baking pan. Its sweet, elegant aroma reminded me of home.

“And that tastes good?” Ghatt looked doubtful.

Hmm, it probably did, but I had other doubts to preoccupy me. Green vegetables were one thing, but would people of this world be open to eating green dessert? Presentation is everything, after all. The green moss creeping all over the castle gave me pause.

“Off to chill it nooow,” announced Machina. She put the cheesecake in a wooden box and hooked it to a drone, then sent it up into the skies like the tempura the day before.

Back to breakfast. First, I tossed the scallops with corn, butter, and soy sauce. To the shrimp, I added sweet-and-spicy mayo I'd whipped up with a fruit similar to avocado. Then, I carefully laid the shellfish on the dough. Finally, I sprinkled cheese over everything once again and drizzled olive oil to top it off. Fourth pie, check. Now all that remained was—

“Machina, you got this?”

“I'm on iiiittt!”

—the baking, which I asked her to handle. I'd decided to leave whatever I could to her going forward. I mean, I was an adventurer—not a chef.

Still, I guess I should make something for the king myself, too. Is it just Japanese people who think basically everything tastes better with sugar and soy sauce? Are we totally off?

I threw the ingredients in a frying pan and gave them a good shake.

“Mooorning.”

“Good mooorniing.”

“Hey, morning.”

The elven sisters emerged from their tent, Éa looking bright and chipper, Lana a little on the sleepier side. They washed their faces with distilled water I'd stored by the sink and did their hair. Éa had stolen into my bed the night before. Nothing had happened, of course. She'd just wanted some cuddles.

Not like you could ever try something with your sister-in-law, right? Wait, if she's just an in-law, then...

The clopping of hooves snapped me out of my indecent thoughts. A person I recognized sat astride the horse. I caught glimpses of her thighs beneath her fluttering skirt. Why were all the women in this blasted realm trying to tempt me?

Or maybe I'm overthinking things? That must be it, right? I hope so.

“Pleasant morning to you, Lord Souya,” she greeted me, gracefully dismounting, light as a feather.

“Morning, Lanceil.”

Just then Lana scurried over, got in her face, and icily asked, “What business brings King Remlia’s illegitimate wench to our doors?”

“None that concerns the tainted blight of the Heuress Forest,” Lanceil snapped.

She and Lana grabbed each other by the arms like a couple of wrestlers. And they were off again. As that played out in the background, Machina began lining up our freshly baked breakfast. We hooked Ghatt’s portion to a drone and sent it shooting up into the atmosphere.

“Kindly go through me for any issues you wish to take up with my husband, would you?!”

“Absolutely not! I am operating under the king’s official decree! I have no intention of taking orders from a filthy elf!”

Can you two at least stop your warfare on my campsite? And look at you, Lana, just casually busting out upper-arm strength on par with a vanguard. You are a mage, aren’t you? I guess descendants of heroes are just built different.

“Lanceil, want some breakfast before you go?” I offered.

“Yes! By all means!”

“That’s where you politely decline!”

“Absolutely nottt!” Keep at it, you two. At least you’ll get some good exercise in before breakfast.

Ghatt’s expression mirrored my exasperation. I finished my contribution to the king’s offering and packed it in a leather bag. That’s when I heard a faint “*Sooou*” off in the distance. Bel and Shuna came into view, waving as they approached.

Taking no note of that development, Lana and Lanceil heated up their brawl to the next level. They spread out their interlocked arms and pulled, drawing their foreheads close until *wham!* their heads slammed together. Lana fell to her knees. Her smaller stature had cost her the match. A bright red blotch bloomed on Lanceil’s forehead, too, but she forced herself to suppress her

grimace.

“Laualliuna, I’ve won this battle.”

“*Grr, rghh!*” Tears welling in her eyes, Lana cradled her head and came running over to me. “*Daaarliiing!*” She pressed herself up against my back, treating it to a lovely sensation. This much stimulation so early in the morning took a toll on me.

“Y-you wench!” cried Lanceil. “Have you no shame?!”

“Hush. A wife has every right to seek comfort from her husband.”

“*Rgh!* Well, the other day Lord Souya tied my hair up for me while I was cooking, I’ll have you know!”

“*Ngh—!* I’ll just ask him to do that for me, too!”

“You coward! Oh—well, he also taught me how to cook. How about that? I bet you don’t do anything but eat and sleep, like a proper cow!”

“Wha—?!” That was a pretty fancy way of saying I’d shown her how to make instant ramen. But she had a point: Lana really did pass out after meals. But adventuring was no picnic, so getting enough rest was a vital part of the job. “O-oh yeah? Well, he’s caressed my stomach before.”

Sensing the conversation taking a dangerous turn, I stepped in. “Machina, bring down the cake for me.”

“Okaaay.”

The drone descended. Lanceil leaped back, startled. “How mysterious. Lord Souya, is that walking pillar your companion? Could this perhaps be the dwarf said to have been spotted recently in town?”

“Yeah, but it’s too much of a hassle to explain. She’s my partner.”

“Pleasure to meet you. Good morning, Lady Lanceil.”

“Oh, the pleasure is all mine.” Machina tilted her torso, lowering her head to Lanceil, who returned the reverent bow. I got the feeling they might get along.

“Woow, something smells amaaazing.”

“I’m tired.”

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Bel, Mr. Shuna. Thank you for always taking such good care of Isolla,” Machina greeted the siblings, who’d just arrived at the campsite this very moment.

“Ah, hello. Are you Isollie’s...mother?” asked Bel.

“No, I am her artificially intelligent superior commander.”

“...?” The robot’s explanation left Bel looking even more confused and Shuna as sleepy as ever.

Placing the box of cake on the table, I inspected its contents. It had chilled more thoroughly than I’d hoped. Was the upper atmosphere that cold?

Ahh, now that I think about it, I’ve never seen any birds flying that high. Maybe that’s got something to do with it. I guess I can look into that later, too.

Removing the baking mold, I made sure the cake was free of blemishes. All good. You could easily put this on sale. “Machina.”

“Okaaaay, time to dress it up.” She decorated the top with whipped cream and sweet bean paste. I was all thumbs with this kind of thing. She was the only one who could crack it. A second later, it was done. I dubbed it “*zunda* cheesecake.” Zero Otherworldly elements, almost entirely inspired by Miyagi Prefecture (home to *zunda*).

“Whoooa, Sou, what’s this? It looks suuuper yummy! I want some.”

“Darling, I’d like a slice as well.”

Bel and Lana got ready to attack. But it wasn’t to be.

“This is an offering for the king,” I announced, crushing their dreams.

““Awww,”” the two unlikely hecklers booed in unison.

I placed a note Machina had written explaining the package’s contents in the box, set it so the cake stand wouldn’t slip, and wrapped everything in a decorative cloth.

“Lanceil, take this to His Highness, please. I hate to ask, but I need you to carry it back on foot. Take it on the horse and it will one hundred percent get smushed.”

“Of course, as you wish. I’ll risk my life to see it reaches him.”

“Don’t do that. If you drop it or it gets damaged, just come back and I’ll make another one.”

“Certainly. You truly are so wonderfully kind.” To be honest, I just didn’t want her risking her life over some cake.

“Oh, and take this, too.”

“And this is?”

I handed her the leather bag. “Sweet-and-sour roasted sunflower seeds. Make sure you spit out the shells and eat only the insides. Feel free to snack on a few on your way back if you like.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” she angrily asserted.

“By the way, Souya,” Shuna began. “Who is this woman to you?”

“Shunie, you sure do have a thing for silver hair, don’t ya?” teased Bel. “Do you want your master *that badly?*”

“N-no I don’t.”

Without missing a beat, Lanceil responded, “Young adventurers, Lord Souya is the man I have decided to take as my spouse.”

“No he isn’t!” Lana flat-out rejected her claim. I had neither the guts nor the decency to deny the idea outright. More than anything, Bel’s sunny smile had me terrified.

“Ladies and gentlemen, honored guests.” A soft voice caught everyone’s attention. It came from Éa, who had been suspiciously quiet. She’d already finished setting the table. “All preparations to break our fast this good morning have concluded. If I may, I believe further fraternization can wait until after our meal. Now, please, take your seats.”

Who the hell is this?! Where’d this new personality come from?! It’s like Éa’s abandoned her usual wolf girl persona and is pretending to be a proper elven princess or something... I mean, she is actually a princess, but still!

Beside me, Ghett looked just as flabbergasted, and Lana seemed not to

believe her eyes, either. *Who is that?* Bel and Shuna pointed as they took their seats. Perplexed, we all settled down at the table.

“Lord Brother, an introduction of our fare, if you will.” Lord Brother?! *Seriously, what’s gotten into you?!*

“Uh, umm, right. A few words of explanation, if I may. Today we’re having a baked dish made from a flatbread lathered in a base of tomato sauce and covered with cheese and other toppings. It’s called pizza. Sorry, I’m so confused, I don’t know what else to say.”

Machina went around serving tea.

“Honored guests, raise your prayers in thanks to your primary gods and goddesses,” Éa directed.

Is it just me, or is that a halo I see shining above her? Is she hurt? Seriously, is she okay?

I met Lana’s gaze to check, but all her look told me in return was *I have no idea*. We all finished saying grace and waited on Éa’s next words.

“We have gathered here today as a truly diverse group of individuals: heims, elves, merman, beastmaid, dwarf. Expansive though the three continents may be, one could not possibly hope to witness members of these five noble races sit and break bread together as one anywhere else. That is how exceptionally rare this repast is. Furthermore, we have an Otherworlder’s singular curios and skills to thank for the meal before us. It is, in every sense of the words, an Otherworldly feast. Allow me to extend my thanks to you all for joining us, and to my lord brother and his trusty servant Machina for preparing these victuals.” She spoke so eloquently that both Machina and I reflexively bowed our heads in response.

“I, Éa Raua Heuress, am positively trembling with excitement at the prospect of enjoying this meal with you all as equals, and at the thought of this delectable combination of seafood and vegetables.” *Hmm?* “You all have your plates, correct? Do you have your forks in hand? Have you been served a drink? Are you ready?” *Hmmm?*

She looked around at each and every one of us before announcing, “Well,

then.....dibs on this shrimp pizzaaaaaaaaa!”

You did all that to get the first slice?!

A low-grade brawl broke out over the shrimp pizza, and the Otherworldly feast descended into chaos.

CHAPTER 2

In Search of Glory

Back at the city gates, we ran into Pops and gave him a casual greeting. When we passed each other, I felt something get shoved into my backpack. After meeting up with Arvin and Zenobia, we headed to the Zavah Night Owl Trade Group's basement to go over the schedule for the day. I scanned the map I'd received, then incinerated the original. If it got out, his sharing a chart with a group of rookies like us would deal a huge blow to his reputation. It would not do for the Father of Adventurers to play favorites.

Leaving Lana behind had been a hell of a challenge. She'd thrown a full-blown tantrum. Did elves suddenly regress to children when they ran out of MP? Either way, I couldn't let such a precious moment pass by, so I recorded it for posterity. I planned to replay it next time I felt down. It would soothe the most fatigued of minds.

"Our goal for today is the twelfth floor," I began. "Lana won't be joining us, so don't count on any wide-range firepower. If we come up against three or more enemies at once, we run, regardless of the circumstances. But let's see what we can do against any individual foes. Depending on how this pans out, I expect we'll come back up by about midday." It's not that I didn't trust Pops; I just wanted to confirm the map's accuracy for myself.

"Understood." Good old Arvin. He only agreed so quickly because he had full faith in me. His trust, in turn, instilled me with the desire to craft foolproof strategies that would never let him down, or, failing that, ones we could retry even if at first we didn't succeed. "Setting that aside for the moment, what in St. Lillideas's name happened to those three?" He gestured over at Éa, Shuna, and Bel sitting in a row, stewing in venomous fury.

"They got into a fight over breakfast this morning." I'd underestimated the youthful appetite. I mean, not that I was old or anything.

“This jerk put on a whole show so she could hog it all for herself,” accused Shuna, pointing at Éa.

“I’m sooo sorry,” she mocked, rolling her eyes.

“Shunie lost his cool and whipped out his sword, so the beastmaid lady beat him to a pulp,” Bel helpfully explained.

Lanceil, who did not take breaches of etiquette lightly, had captured Shuna and given him a thorough lecture and spanking. By the time he got to take a bite of the pizza, the cheese had totally chilled. Éa and Bel had made sure Shuna could see them all through his scolding, taunting him with each bite of the warm, melty delight they took.

“Hold up, then why are you so pissed, Bel?” asked Shuna.

“Nooo reeeason! I’m not even maaad!”

Ever since Bel had seen me feeding a slice to Lana, her mood had taken a turn for the nasty. Her fury grew with each passing minute. Was I supposed to do something about this? Oh, and Éa hadn’t actually gotten to try the pizza she’d lusted after, even after successfully playing all of us, so she’d come out of the meal completely discontented.

How had this happened? Wasn’t sharing delicious food supposed to make everyone smile? This was getting serious. Had my pizza tasted that bad? If only it had come out a little better; maybe then they wouldn’t have fought so—*Whoa, that was close.*

I’m an adventurer. My job is to explore the dungeon. By no stretch of the imagination am I a chef, nor do I have any intention of spreading my culinary traditions around. I’m treading a gray area as it is, but if I leave any more proof a Japanese person came through, there’ll be no going back. I’ve gotta be more careful.

“Right, then let’s get delving. We’ll meet up again on the tenth floor.”

At my order, everyone picked up their designated bags with the provisions I’d portioned out and left one by one. This was how it always went. Officially speaking, we weren’t registered as a single party. It just so *happened* that a party with Arvin in the lead and another with me at the helm would meet in the

dungeon and work together from there.

We only went through this annoying farce since Arvin and elves joining the same party would stir up a lot of trouble. His hometown, Ellusion, was currently at war, though nobody knew exactly who they were up against. All they'd heard was that the enemy group belonged to the elven race and went by "the Black Elves." An internal struggle for power raging among the popes of Ellusion complicated the situation even further. A flood of deceptions, betrayals, and deaths had sent the city spiraling down a whirlpool of pandemonium. Arvin had embarked on a quest for glory to gain a papal pardon for his elder sister. Getting caught on an expedition with two elves would destroy his hope beyond resurrection.

I'd half forgotten, but the douchebags I'd met the night before had been knights from his country. Maybe they were acquainted.

"Zenobia, can I steal you later for a minute?" I asked.

"Yes, of course." I needed information. It'd be easiest to ask Arvin directly, but only an unfit leader would put their members in such an awkward position. Best to eliminate all complications in secret.

After making our way onto the main street, Éa and I started walking side by side, the others a few paces ahead of us.

"Now that I think about it," she started.

"Hmm?"

She took a long, hard look at me. I took a long, hard look right back. My sister-in-law was stunning. Elves were naturally gorgeous, but I'd say Éa was particularly captivating. She had skin as fine as porcelain, long, slender arms and legs, lengthy locks of blond hair that sparkled like gold dust, and a face of unrivaled beauty. As an added bonus, she indulged us all with liberal displays of her stomach and thighs, a most generous treat. This very moment, four different men had their lustful eyes trained on her. Of course, I viewed her through a "little sister" filter, so my perspective was a little biased.

"When was the last time you and I walked through town, just the two of us?" she asked.

“Ohhh, now that you mention it.” Excellent question. Wait, had we never done this before?

“Tee-hee-hee, your arm is miiine.” My little sister hugged my left arm. Éa had just a tiny, tiny bit on me heightwise, so she had to lean on me a little. Her modest bosom brushed against my elbow.

“Hey, come on.”

“Whaaat, it’s not like it costs you anything.”

“I hope not.”

I felt someone staring daggers at me from within the crowd.

Madame Beltriche, your glare is freaking me out. She’s my sister, you know. Is our party gonna be okay?





My inner turmoil took a back seat as we arrived at the Tower of Legions. The first part went smoothly without any incident worth sharing. The map proved incredibly accurate. We'd secured a straight shot through to the thirteenth floor—or so it seemed. In the end, we called it a day at the eleventh floor.

After successfully descending into the dungeon in the morning, we made it back to town around lunchtime. Needing more intel on our *little problem*, we headed straight for the pub. Why, you might ask, would we go to a bar instead of the Guild offices? Simple: The latter charged for its services. While this was perhaps not the most reliable avenue, we could always gather information that was hot off the presses at the bar. Not to mention that we would find an incredibly knowledgeable person at our haunt of choice; with any luck, he'd share a few tips for the price of lunch.

A cousin of King Remlia's ran a pub called the Wild Ox and Silver Fox House. Just as I'd expected, it was bursting with people. That wasn't unusual for the lunchtime rush, but there was something more at play here. I had everyone order their grub and grab a seat. Shuna, Bel, and Éa sat beside each other like always. Arvin and Zenobia found stools a bit farther down.

I spotted a throng of adventurers crowding up to the boss behind the counter and joined them. A few were people I recognized by sight but had never spoken to, initiates who'd started out at the same time I did.

"Calm down! Let's go through this in order! First off, any unique characteristics?" the boss boomed.

Someone yelled, "It's a turtle!" After that came cries of, "Snake!" "Lizard!" "Clam!" "Bear!" and "I ain't never seen anythin' like it!" Lastly someone else yelled out, "It's a dragon!" and a hush fell over us all.

"None of you are making any sense. The only intelligible thing you've said so far is that something showed up on the eleventh floor." *Couldn't have put it better myself.* "Oi, Souya. You get a look at it, too?"

He caught me. I didn't really want to draw attention to myself, but I couldn't

run away now. “Yeah. It stood about three stalts”—six meters—“tall, with the body of an enormous rock-eating turtle and the neck of a gigantic snake. It had what looked like dragon scales covering it all over. I’m not sure on the neck length, but I imagine it could stretch out to at least five stalts”—ten meters.

I’d tried tossing it a scrap of monster meat, and that neck had lashed out and snatched it quicker than I could follow. Strangely, though, it had spit out the slab without eating it.

“Its mouth was about one stalt”—two meters—“wide, big enough to swallow your standard adventurer whole. And there’s one more serious problem.” This snag had sent us packing and had brought all the other adventurers to the yard. “It’s settled down right by the stairwell to the twelfth floor and doesn’t look like it’s got any plans to leave.”

“Hmm, that so?” Boss zhuzhed his mohawk, deep in thought. “Anyone here use flamecraft?”

A spectacularly ripped specimen of a heim responded, “I’m an adept of the Jumichla Style. I bombarded it with fire, but that didn’t even register, much less inflict any damage on the beast.”

Murmurs flickered through the group. The magecraft used to create flames held tremendous power and was easy to learn, so any competent pyromancer knew how to wield it. If an adept couldn’t even scratch the thing, the less skilled wouldn’t have a ghost of a chance.

“How ’bout physical attacks?”

A hulking beastman answered the barkeep’s second question. “My mighty ax didn’t so much as crack its shell.” A heim would have a hell of a time just trying to carry the weapon he wielded. Unbreakable as it seemed, its blade had chipped away, leaving it looking like a saw.

“.....Now I get it. You all have my thanks for passing on your hard-earned insights. I’m off to let the Guild know about this.”

Boss swung over the counter and shouted a message back to the kitchen. Lunch, it seemed, was on him for the day. This strategically charitable deed done, he exited the bar. The crowd let out a whooping cheer and disbanded. I

heard the waitstaff and chefs wail.

For a brief moment, I lingered. This mysterious creature had left the boss, a hardened veteran, without an immediate answer. Was I the only one getting a bad feeling about this?



We split up for the day. I gave Éa, Shuna, and Bel some spending money and sent them off to run around. Arvin said he had something to do, so Zenobia and I settled in at a different watering hole. A small, privately owned establishment, it had a yellowed quest board still covered with job adverts whose deadlines had long passed. About ten people could fill the place. It didn't seem very trendy, but I imagined it had a couple of regulars since it had clearly been there for years.

I quickly ordered a few small plates and drinks. They soon arranged them on the table: wine, hard bread, and bowls of soup nearly overflowing with cabbage and bacon. We might've hit the jackpot with this spot.

"So, something happen between you and Bel?"

"*Koghff—!*" I did a spit take with the spoonful of soup in my mouth at the jab Zenobia struck me with out of nowhere.

"Oookay, I see what's going on here."

"Wh-what is?" The hand I was holding my mug with shook from nerves.

"You see girls like her every once in a while. Instead of going for a normal, stable love, they fall for the dangerous, destructive types. Bel's into the latter, of course. But looks aside, she's still just a child emotionally. A married man must seem so mature to her, like someone you share your life with. Plus, this one's her unofficial leader. Still, it's strange. That little one's a late bloomer through and through, you know. I just can't see her making the first move unless she caught you dead to rights in a moment of weakness."

Stop, Zenobia, please. That hits too close to home.

"So what is it?"

“Actually, this Lowomen disciple and I—” I accidentally started to reveal the truth.

“Not that. The thing you wanted me for. Hang on, what? Lowomen is a deity of servitude, right? If I’m not mistaken, the followers run a brothel, don’t—”

“I need to talk to you about Arvin.”

“Spill everything.”

I swerved the conversation into a hard left. His name was like a magic word with Zenobia.

Should I be worried about our party dynamics?

“The thing is, last night I ran into two knights of St. Lillideas. No offense to Arvin, but they were bottom-of-the-barrel asses. And I saw them abusing an elf, of all things.”

A gauntlet, a powerful item possessed by pretty useful curses, was wrapped around my right wrist. Wearing it seemed to make me lose my cool whenever elves were involved.

.....No, maybe that’s just what hits close to home.

“Do me a favor and don’t go picking fights with lowlifes like that. You’re not the only one who’ll have to pay for it.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry. I let my emotions get the best of me. My point is, I wanted to ask you for some background info that relates to Arvin—and those two knights, actually, since they pray to her, too. St. Lillideas—what kind of goddess is she?” In the Other Dimension, the deity a person served told you a lot about them.

“You don’t even know that? Or so I want to say, but fair enough. This isn’t exactly common knowledge for an Otherworlder, is it?” She took a sip of her wine to wet her whistle and began to explain. “Do you know the tale of the silver pieces?”

“The one about the king of the beasts?” I recalled the story Ghett had told me and repeated it to her.

It revolved around this king, ruler of all beastfolk, who declared open war on

elves, dwarves, and heims—so-called “manfolk.” He backed them into a corner, only for the tides to turn when they fought back with weapons made of “sinister spectral silver” or “sinispectral silver.” This lost him the war and instilled deep in the hearts of manfolk a hatred of beastfolk that still seethes to this day. Later, that sinispectral silver was converted into currency and spread throughout the Great Land as a check on the beastfolk, a threat that could easily be refashioned into weapons if they ever—

“That’s not exactly it,” Zenobia cut in. “He wasn’t the king of the beasts but the king of *beastfolk*.” It seemed merfolk and heims saw things differently. “And he was vanquished by a great king of men named Rha Warz Duin Gargantua. He had eight children, who would later be known as ‘the beast-hunting kings.’ Lillideas was their life partner. She supported them behind the scenes, had a great hand in founding Ellusion, and produced the greatest and strongest monarchy in the history of man. This honor earned her a place among the Legion Gods.

“Of course, it’s not like she was betrothed to all of them. In Ellusion, they model their system of governance after the royal family and select eight popes. Each takes care of military, domestic, international, or economic affairs, et cetera, and inherits the name of the original prince their duties correspond to. If the name of the prince St. Lillideas married ever came to light, the power balance would shift toward that pope. That’s why her husband’s name is a closely held secret in Ellusion and in the Church of St. Lillideas.”

But Zenobia’s account wasn’t quite right, either. According to the merfolk, the king of men had transformed into a beast himself and ordered his children to kill themselves. It was only natural to want to sugarcoat that, but something about his name had stuck with me.

The great king of heims: Rha Warz Duin Gargantua.

The king of the beasts: Rha Guzüri Duin Olossal.

The shared portions of their names couldn’t be mere coincidence. And one more thing: It felt like I’d heard the name Duin before somewhere else.

“Zenobia, can I ask you something? A merman friend of mine told me the king’s name was Rha Guzüri Du—”

She threw herself across the table and clamped my mouth shut. An empty bottle crashed; everyone stared at us. I caught the food she'd sent flying.

"H-how could you?!" Zenobia stared at me in alarm. The other patrons seemed to think, *Ah, just a lover's quarrel*, and lost interest. "Don't you ever say that name out loud, especially not the rest."

When she removed her hand, I asked, "Huh? Why not?"

"It's a hidden, forbidden name, a curse to all heims. My master devoted himself to studying it, but they labeled him a heretic and exiled him from Ellusion. Then one night, he got absolutely plastered and told me just a portion of it. The following day, he cut off one of his own ears in front of me, saying, 'I told you nothing. Should you ever discover the remainder of the name and chant it, an unspeakable calamity against which this atonement cannot compare will befall you.' So I erased it from my mind. I'd forgotten it all this time until now! What's your problem?!"

"I'm sorry." I'd messed up and said the wrong thing. I should have been more careful as an outsider, yet I'd let curiosity get the best of me and regretted it.

"Listen to me, okay? You are never to voice that name again. Ever. Under any circumstances. Promise me."

"I promise. I won't ever say it again."

"You're lucky that I don't have ties to the Church of St. Lillideas, you know. You could get executed for that, executed! Crucified, then burned at the stake. There wouldn't even be any ashes of you left."

"I'm really so sorry. I was negligent."

"Excuse me! Another drink, please!" On me, of course.

Just then I got word from Isolla. "Squad Member Souya, do you have a moment?"

"Go ahead." Zenobia stared at me questioningly. *It's a message*, I mouthed.

"Sir Arvin, the line is established. Go ahead."

"*Right*," I heard him reply. "*Souya? Can you read me?*" Now his voice came through the receiver.

“Yeah, loud and clear.”

“I need you to come to the Guild right away. The Guildmaster’s called in all level-fifteen delvers and below. It’s got something to do with that monster.”

“Got it. I’m on my way.” I hung up. Zenobia considered me as if inspecting a mysterious item.

“A handy little device, that. Who was it?”

“Arvin. The Guildmaster’s making some announcement about the monster. I’m gonna head on over. What about you?”

“I’ll stay for another round. This wine is delicious.”

Suit yourself, I thought, putting a few extra coins down before leaving.

In no time at all, I arrived at the Adventurer’s Guild, located on the first floor of the dungeon.

A throng of people packed the in-house Guild bar. I spotted the back of Arvin’s head and caught up to him. We exchanged quick glances in greeting. I saw a few more familiar faces in the crowd. Everyone had their eyes turned toward a fair, slight young boy with almost decoratively small wings sprouting from his back. He was the kind of beautiful lad whom women who liked younger men would want to instantly lunge at.

“Twenty-three people, is it?” he counted. “I guess that’ll have to do.”

Despite appearances to the contrary, he was in fact the Guildmaster. Appearances didn’t really give you much to go by with people in the Other Dimension.

“Today, I have an announcement on behalf of the Adventurer’s Guild regarding the monster that has appeared on the eleventh floor. After consulting with materials in the High Tower Library, Remlian adventurers’ tales, Windovnickel, and Lord Rasta ole Rhasvah’s extensive knowledge, we have been able to confirm no prior evidence of this particular creature and have therefore determined it is an entirely new breed. We have named the beast Dragonoise Mydranga and designated it a new Dark Crowned monster.”

Creatures were given the “Dark Crowned” title to essentially put a bounty on

their heads. A wide range of attributes could earn them the designation, such as interfering with adventurers' explorations, possessing some specialized capacity to breed unusually quickly, or intentionally targeting adventurers over other monsters. The only constants: They were universally strong foes, a suicide mission for the bargain-bin adventurer, and whoever took them down would be in for an extravagant reward from the king, one that came with great honor.

A ripple of excitement washed over the crowd.

"We believe the creature appeared in part due to overhunting on the tenth floor. The destabilization in the ecosystem there caused a Great King Turtle to instantly mutate into something very closely resembling a dragon. Needless overhunting never fails to later rain down as calamity. May you all keep this in mind," he continued, smiling wickedly.

"Now then, most of you gathered here have yet to delve deeper than the fifteenth floor. The reason I called you here specifically was to grant you temporary leave to attempt to slay this Dragonoise Mydranga before everyone else. You will have only three days to accomplish this, however. After those three days, I will give the task to the general adventuring public. And make no mistake, if this happens, elite adventurers will slay it from right under your noses.

"This foe is strong, formidable. Nevertheless, the opportunity to encounter a Dark Crown in the lower levels is nigh unheard of. This is your chance to earn honor. I'll post the details on the quest board. Do carefully consider the implications before you attempt to fill it. In any event, take care not to throw your lives away. That is all."

The moment the Guildmaster left, the throng made a frenzied rush for the door. After a few minutes, no one but Arvin and me remained. Most of the others had been leaders of their respective parties. In all likelihood, they'd sprinted off to fill their party members in on the news, each one spurred on by ambition. A sign of a true adventurer, you might say.

"So Souya. What's our move?"

I took a seat to chew over Arvin's question. He sat directly across from me. We'd gone up against the dragonoise once, so we had a reasonable amount of

intel on it.

Physical attacks didn't hold much promise. Standard arrows hadn't left a scratch, and I doubted even Shuna's sword could slice through that shell. Mythlanic arrows were an option, but I wasn't sure I'd get the opportunity to deliver a fatal blow. Plus, they were too expensive. If I didn't watch how much I spent on them, I'd go broke and wouldn't be able to delve at all. And even if we started making more now, we'd only get six tops done in time. Not to mention that I'd have to blow every last coin to my name to do it.

So what about magic, then? It wasn't totally out of the question, as long as Lana's MP could fully recover within the three-day time limit. Mages in this dimension generally fell into one of two factions. Those who followed the Jumichla school of thought proclaimed magic was "a supportive force flowing alongside the work of personkind." Those who subscribed to the Hoense camp asserted magic was "a destructive force beyond comprehension."

Lana studied under the Hoense School, an intensely martial-arts-focused collective otherwise known as the "Clever Meatheads." People derided their techniques as bloodthirsty, heinous, and ruinous. According to Zenobia, not even the magicians of the royal court could conjure the extremely advanced Dragbane attack, modeled after a dragon's destructive breath, that Lana had cast. Not only that, but the raging flames it unleashed would have burned that entire floor of the dungeon to the ground if she hadn't worked some incomprehensibly complex restraint into the incantation to suppress and shrink it to scale.

Watch for the beauty

With the enormous bosom—

A crazy-powerful mage.

Not the most technically sound haiku, but you get the idea—my wife was freakin' incredible.

Maybe we'll have to rely on her again for this battle, too—no, I'd really hate to do that. I don't want to work her too hard.

I still didn't have a clear grasp on how excessively draining her magic could

affect her in the long run. She insisted it wouldn't lead to anything more serious than "a little coma," but apparently these bouts of unconsciousness put mages in such a precarious situation that they also went by "lethal slumbers." It wasn't unusual for a caster to never wake from one. The word around town was that they could also cut their life spans short.

Lana hadn't mentioned anything to me about these incredibly vital matters, especially when it came to her body. I'd tried asking her, but she would always casually brush off my inquiries. This princess was a real handful. Not that I didn't get where she was coming from.

"I...can't decide right away. Sorry," I apologized after the longish time it'd taken to collect my thoughts. "I'll give you an answer by tomorrow. What are you thinking, Arvin?" *That promise of glory must look pretty good to him.*

"I think.....," he started, then froze. Not a single muscle in his body so much as twitched.

I ordered a drink. A little while later, my lukewarm, diluted fruit juice came out. It quenched my thirst a bit, but it'd take more sugar than this to power my brain.

".....Oh, I want to try to slay it." *Took you long enough. Has he always taken forever to respond to things? Or has he got something on his mind?*

He continued. "That being said, I'm coming up completely blank as to how. I have no doubts I can keep everyone safe behind my shield, but taking it down is absolutely beyond me."

"Yeah, I'm in pretty much the same boat. But—"

"Arvin!" someone called out behind me. Curious, he turned in the direction of the voice.

"Sir...Werner?" He sprang from his chair looking for all the world like a beaming little kid. An ominous feeling seized me.

"I hardly expected to see you here! Have you fared well? How far down have you delved?" the voice asked.

"Yes, I'm getting on just fine. I've successfully made it down to the eleventh

floor, my lord.”

The young man in a knight’s armor and Arvin embraced like old friends. A gruff man lingered behind them; his face hardened a little when he met my gaze. Similar designs adorned their matte white armor plating; none of them wore helmets.

Threads of silver wove delicate designs across the cape draped loosely over the young man’s shoulders. An engraved brooch bearing the likeness of a beast clasped the exquisite garment together. And a huge, gratuitously extravagant sword I knew all too well hung at his hip.

“I hear a Dark Crowned monster has appeared at a shallow level in the dungeon. You must know you’ll never again see such a golden chance to make a name for yourself. Surely this is divine guidance from St. Lillideas, Arvin. I have every faith you can vanquish the beast.”

“You’re far too kind, Sir Werner. I cannot help but take heart at such encouraging words from the man we all expect to become the hero of our generation.”

“Hmm? And who is this? A member of your party?” asked the caped man, referring to me.

“Ye— N-no, this is a friend of mine, leader of his own party. He often gives me counsel, as I hardly have any idea what I’m doing.”

I’d been hoping to ignore the guy, but I couldn’t leave Arvin hanging. Turning to face the asshole I’d met at the parlor, I greeted him by saying, “*Nice to meet you.* I’m just a regular adventurer by the name of Souya.”

“*Pleasure to make your acquaintance.* I’m Werner Carbezzo, a knight of St. Lillideas. It’s a relief to know my master’s younger disciple is in such capable hands.”

In addition to sharing Arvin’s blond hair and blue eyes, Werner had an irritatingly handsome-ish face and long, pin-straight locks. He no doubt took advantage of that shiny exterior to hook village maidens and abuse them behind closed doors. That aside, he was shorter and less physically fit than Arvin. And when you took his style, personality, and treatment of women into

account, he didn't even measure up to Arvin's ankles as a man.

"Arvin, how long it's been," the boorish knight greeted him next.

"Sir Luxgarre, you're looking as unassailable as ever."

"I intend to keep serving as a knight attendant to our heroes for at least another thirty years. My real concern is whether this unyieldingly trying hero can learn to stand on his own two feet by then."

"If it's rest you seek, Luxgarre, how would you care to begin that retirement today?" Werner proposed, his expression deadly serious.

"Oh, how you jest. Grievances concerning you will always find their way to me. I will have no rest." He waved off the threat with what was perhaps a very practiced hand.

"I'm relieved to see things are the same as ever between you two," noted Arvin. He looked around as if searching for someone, then asked, "And what of Sanperié? Is he off on an individual errand today?"

"Hardly, he's—"

Luxgarre cut his ward off. "Sanperié has gone missing. He took off unaccompanied to explore the thirteenth floor, wandered astray, and simply vanished."

"Aye, probably long dead now."

"Werner!" He barked angrily at the other knight for the thoughtless remark, drawing several Guild employees' attention. "I am sorry, Arvin. But now that our orders to monitor Neomia have been lifted, we'll set out in search of him once more."

"Excuse me for prying," I began on behalf of my vanguard, who was shocked speechless, "but when exactly did this Sanperié go missing?"

"Sixty days ago," replied Luxgarre. There was almost no hope he'd survived. Nobody had ever spent that long in the dungeon and lived to tell the tale. The longest record I'd heard was ten days. "I'm well aware of what that means. If nothing else, however, I would like to retrieve his remains."

"I swear, even in death he insists on making our lives difficult," snorted

Werner. “Arvin, you should have been the one to come with us. With your talent, this never would have happened.”

I glowered at him for his flippant tone and attempt to pass the blame. “You’re the leader of your party?” I asked.

“What a ludicrous question. Who better to take command than the hero?”

This man spoke with absolutely zero sense of accountability. He had no conception of the burdens or responsibility a leader must bear. I kept going.

“In that case, the blame for any casualties falls entirely on you. This man may have acted without orders, but it’s your fault for not being able to stop him. How dare you call yourself a leader if you don’t even understand this most fundamental aspect of—”

“Please, Souya, enough,” warned Arvin, and I held my tongue. His Heroicness turned his wrath toward me, the veins in his face bulging. “I apologize for the disrespect my friend has shown you. Please, I beg of you to do all you can for Sanperié. If at all possible, I hope you can return him to his family.”

Werner said nothing, so Luxgarre stepped in. “We’ll do everything in our power.”

With a click of his tongue, His Heroicness turned on his heel looking disgruntled, then left Arvin with a few parting words. “I expect great things from you regarding that Dark Crown. Depending on your performance, I may give your sister’s situation some consideration.”

What an asshole. He almost certainly knew Arvin could do nothing about that, but here Sexual Predator #2 was pressuring Arvin anyway. In case you’re curious, the title of Sexual Predator #1 belonged to this kingdom’s prince.

Arvin trudged sadly back to his seat, his shoulders drooping. I called a waitress over, then ordered salted pork and some strong liquor.

“What was Sanperié like?” I asked softly.

“Hmm?Oh, he was three years younger than me and came from proper knightly lineage.” The alcohol arrived, so I poured us both a glass. It was scalding to the touch, but my companion threw it back in one gulp. “I’m an

illegitimate child, you know, so knights of pedigree always looked down on me. Sanperié was the only one to ever train with me as an equal.”

After that, he told me the story of Sanperié the knight—a run-of-the-mill tale of friendship, so to speak. Some people in this realm first judge a person by their origins and social standing. Conversely, some first try to see the person before concerning themselves with lineage or stock. Sanperié clearly belonged to the latter group. He did not view Arvin, a bastard raised in the slums, as some curious oddity, but rather treated him as he would any other peer. He must have been of a truly singular breed, especially in this world.

Together, he and Arvin had studied under the renowned Zammonglace, sharpening their skills against each other in friendly rivalry. Then one day, those talents caught the eye of a descendant of the great heroes. The two received orders to join the knights of St. Lillideas, and their friendship solidified into an indestructible bond. It goes without saying that their relationship went unchanged even after Arvin was stripped of his rank for his great-uncle’s failed assassination attempt. In fact, Sanperié had pleaded his friend’s case before the popes, and, when that had not prevailed, had urged his own father to adopt Arvin.

In the end, Arvin could not recover his title and was banished from Ellusion. But maybe, just maybe, given the fact that his entire family except his elder sister had been executed, he suspected that Sanperié had managed to lessen his sentence to demotion and exile. To this day, Arvin regretted not looking Sanperié in the eye when they’d last parted.

Had Sanperié joined the hero’s entourage and come here by pure coincidence? If the weather or sea routes they’d taken had drifted only slightly differently, they might not have missed each other. And if only they’d been reunited, perhaps this fate could have been avoided.

“I see.” After listening to Arvin reminisce, I remarked, “But man, this liquor must be really something.”

I looked down at Arvin, completely wasted after only two bottles. He lay flat on his face across the table muttering something unintelligible. My entire life, I’d never known what it was like to have a best friend. The one person I’d felt a

connection with had betrayed and left me stranded overseas under essentially indentured conditions. The many vital lessons I'd learned then came in handy for my life here. When you put it that way, maybe I was lucky to have had that experience. Not that I held any resentment anymore. I'd paid all my debts and then some.

"Friends, huh?" I mused.

Scum of times past aside, Arvin and I put our lives in each other's hands, and he always braved the front lines for our party as our shield. Yes, the man completely wasted before me was the very definition of a friend. I would do anything and everything within my power for him. For instance, I'd risk my life at the drop of a hat. The problem was figuring out what I could do to help.

"Souya."

"Hmm?" Suddenly, I found Zenobia standing next to me.

"What's all this?" She took in Arvin's drunken stupor and narrowed her eyes.

"Would you mind giving me a hand?" I asked. "I need to carry him back to his lodgings."

"Fine."

After I settled our bill, she and I each took him by a shoulder and lugged him out of the bar.

"Why was he drinking? He's such a lightweight."

"Oh, I didn't know."

My bad. But sometimes you needed a little alcohol to help you forget. I dropped Arvin off at his inn not too far away and asked Zenobia to look after him. Before I left, I made sure to say one more thing to him:



“No matter what, we are *going* to slay that monster. I promise.”



We had a ton of things to do and only three days to do them all. Equipment had to be made, skills had to be rechecked, and intel on the enemy had to be gathered. We couldn't ignore what other parties were up to, either. In my estimation, out of all the other rookie parties, only two seemed to have what it would take to put the monster down: an ultra-brainy and -brawny all-beastfolk party, and a super-firepower one comprised only of mages—from the Hoense School at that. No other group could conceivably stand a chance of slaying the creature on day one. Still, this didn't seem like a foe you could defeat off the cuff. We'd need to use every last minute we had to prepare and strategize.

Admittedly, I'd already promised Arvin we would slay the thing “no matter what,” but I wouldn't so much as attempt it unless we came up with a workable plan. I'd call on my traditional culture and apologize prostrate in *dogeza* if need be. We'd have plenty more opportunities to take on Dark Crowned monsters in the future, but we'd never get to see them if we died here. I could risk my own life as I pleased, but I couldn't stake the existences of others on a bet we had little chance of winning.

In any event, Lana remained my biggest concern. Our party's firepower varied exponentially according to whether she could come. Which was why I lost all words when I got back to camp.

“Lana!” She'd collapsed on the ground. I put my arms around her and sat her up.

“We.....welcome...back, darling.”

“What happened to you?! Machina! Machina, where are you?!”

“Here I am.” Machina spun round and round as she got closer, looking less chipper than usual.

“What is going on? What happened to Lana's—”

“You'd best see for yourself. Please watch this.”

Nothing made any sense to me. Machina brought up a video on the screen installed in her torso. Taken from a bird's-eye view of the camp, it showed Lana hunched over, digging a hole in the ground with a stick like a petulant child. My machine assistant stood at her side.

"Mistress Lana, did you not find lunch today to your liking? It did not seem like you had much of an appetite. Shall I prepare a light snack for you?"

"No, thank you. It will only taste bitter if I eat it alone."

"I could wake Lady Mythlanica if you like. All we'd need is some meat and a little alcohol to lure her out of her—"

"I'm fine, thank you." What a lovely way to treat my goddess.

Lana stared glumly at her ryvius. Her magic levels had only crept back up by the tiniest hair. *"Machina, I'm holding everyone back. They're all out there risking their lives, yet here I am lazing away at home."*

"That's not true in the slightest, Mistress. Resting your body well for the next expedition is a vital part of the adventurer profession."

"Perhaps, but if all I do is drain my magic, then rest, drain my magic, then rest, eventually I won't be able to keep up with the others—I'm sure of it. I had no idea elven mages placed such a heavy burden on their parties. I'm a terrible woman."

"Please do not be so hard on yourself. It will surely make Mr. Souya sad as well. Is there any way I could help? There is nothing I wouldn't do to ease your mind."

"W-well, there is one favor I'd like to ask, if I may?"

"Of course! Anything you wish!"

Lana's gloomy face lit up just a touch. *"Could you...teach me how to cook? As a woman, I'm ashamed to admit that I've never once in my life so much as toasted a slice of bread, made the simplest soup, or even taken a knife to meat or vegetables. Pulverizing and burning do come easily to me, though."*

"I can absolutely help you with this. But I must warn you, I do not go easy on anyone when it comes to the culinary arts. Prepare yourself for strict criticism."

Now then, let's begin by reviewing proper handwashing techniques."

"I'll do my best."

Machina led Lana to the sink and had her thoroughly lather up, from the spaces between her fingers all the way to the tips. Next, they started washing rice. Machina reprimanded Lana for putting too much force into it. They discarded the starchy water, refilled the pot with the proper amount, then set it over the fire. The pot they used was a "pressure cooker" we'd made ourselves. As a matter of fact, the Mythlanic arrows were a by-product of the process. Stews, soups, and even rice cooked perfectly in this magic pot.

Neither of them moved while they waited for it to finish.

"To tell you the truth, staring into the fire has always had a powerful calming effect on me, ever since I was little. It's like all my thoughts melt away and my mind grows cold and quiet."

"Y-you don't say," Machina responded, a little disturbed at Lana's admission. Twenty minutes later, the rice had cooked. *"Now we uncover it slightly and let the rice cool for about ten minutes."*

"Okay."

The robot rushed to put out the fire. Lana watched, sad to see it dwindle. Next, Machina laid the contents of our condiments-and-spices box on the kitchen counter and brought a few items out of the pantry to use as fillings. Clearly, her lesson was meant to help Lana build a sense of autonomy.

Ten minutes after that, they removed the lid from the pot and fluffed the rice with a wooden paddle.

"This looks beautifully cooked. Now, add a few pinches of salt and mix it in, yes, just like that, Mistress. All you have to do now is mold these into a ball and you'll have made a most traditional Japanese dish—the onigiri, or rice ball. However, an overly standard affair might not hold much excitement, so please use your judgment to add whatever seasoning or filling you think Mr. Souya might like. The rice is still hot, so please dip your hands in cold water and spread a bit of salt on them before you handle it."

Lana studied her options. All the spices had labels that Machina had pasted

onto them so Éa or Lady Mythlanica would not faint from agony if she got into a particularly hot seasoning.

“It should be something tasty... Oh, I know. I’ll add some honey.”

“Shwaat?!” Lana dumped a whole jar of honey into the rice. A shocked emoji flashed up on Machina’s screen.

“Oops, that’s a little too much. We don’t want it to be too sweet, so I’ll add some more salt.”

“Mistress, that’s a bittern—” In went a mound of it.

“Souya does like fish.”

“Let’s at least rinse it out first before—” Lana tossed a whole dried fish in the pot.

“He also likes to add cheese and pepper to things, doesn’t he?” She plopped in a block of cheese and vigorously shook pepper into the mix.

“If you would, Mistress, it’s best to consider how much of everything you—”

“Machina, cooking is so much fun, isn’t it?”

“Indeed! But we must be careful with our measurements!”

Lana had clearly perked up. *“Next, let’s add some mayonnaise, a demon’s pinkie, medicinal shoots salt, and umm, what’s this? I’m not sure, but let’s try putting it in. Souya loves vegetables, so I’ll bet he’d like some of these new varieties of potatoes, eggplants, carrots, and tomatoes. Oh wait, they’re still raw. Let me cook them with some flamecraft.”* She slammed a fireball into the pot. I could almost see the soul of each ingredient, along with any flavor it had once possessed, ascend to the heavens.

“Oh no-no-no-no, oh no-no-no-no-no-no, oh no-no-no-no,” Machina panicked in perfect five-seven-five haiku form.

“Ha-ha! This is fun!” Lana grew even more excited. No longer satisfied with the ingredients before her, she dug some mysterious liquids and plants out from her personal belongings. When lobbing all that in failed to satisfy her, she began to chant. A small portal yawned open midair and rained big, black drops of something down into the pot.

Wait, what is that? Seriously, what in the Legion Gods' names is that?!

"Haah. It feels a little underdone, but it is my first try, so I suppose I'll leave it at that." Give me a break, I thought.

The rice in the pot had turned into a liquid goop. It gurgled and boiled, bubbles rising to the surface along with an unidentified floating object. I desperately wanted to be wrong, but I thought I saw some strange creature swimming inside the pot.

"Mistress, may I check the taste?"

"Of course. And please be brutally honest with your assessment."

Machina dipped her taste sensor into the pot. Instantly, a blaring red alert accompanied by untold numbers of emergency warnings popped up on her screen.

"....." The AI fell silent, her train of thought probably an inch from falling off the rails. If her stress meter had been visible, I bet we would have seen it skyrocketing.

"How is it? I knew it... It's dreadful, right? I was a fool to think I could ever make something good." Lana sounded crestfallen.

Machina flew into panic mode. *"Th-that's not true! I'm positive Mr. Souya will happily eat every last bite!"*

Hey, hold on!

"Do you really think so? Thank goodness. I lost control for a minute there and honestly don't really know what I've made, but that's such a relief to hear. Let me take a taste, too." She picked up a ladle with one hand and scooped up some of the soup(?).

"Mistress! Don't, it's too dangerous!"

"Huh? Ugh...brggh." The smell alone knocked her unconscious.

The end.

"And now you're all caught up."

I patted Lana's head to say, *You did your best.* "And what did you do with that

bomb in the making?”

“Considering the devastating impact it may unleash on the local environment, I’ve created a level-four bio safety management system for it, placed it in secure storage, and sealed it away.”

Did my wife accidentally make a biohazardous weapon? Wait, does that mean my beloved pressure cooker is gone?

“D-darling...” Lana placed a trembling hand on my cheek. “Do not mourn me if I die. Whatever else you do, though, promise me you’ll never take Lanceil as your next wife.”

“Machina, is Lana’s condition that serious?!”

“No, she is merely exceedingly depressed.”

“.....”

“Eeeyaaah!” She let out an odd wail as I squeezed her supple body with all my strength, then picked her up and carried her to a chair.

“Lana, you’re out of magic.”

“.....I’m sorry.”

Checking her ryvius, I saw the MP meter had hit rock bottom again. We had no hope. She could never recover from this in three days. But I couldn’t get angry at her for it—I wasn’t that cruel. And that had absolutely nothing to do with the way her plump bottom felt against my thighs. I only wanted to reward her for trying to cook something for me, though this did seem a little thicker and bigger than I’d imagined, and had a totally different quality from her breasts, but— Wait, what was I thinking? *Ah, her hair has a nice soapy scent.*

Nope. I just couldn’t get my thoughts in order.

“Machina, get some of the king’s sugar, eggs, flour, and cheese out for me. Also a bowl, a whisk, and that biggish tray we have, remember? I only need the egg yolks.”

“Okaaay. I’ll get some oilpaper, too.”

My brain was probably running low on sugar. His Highness would never find

out if I borrowed a bit from his stash, which worked out perfectly since we'd gone through almost all our reserves from the modern world. I could've bought more, but sugar and honey sold for astronomical prices here.

"Lana, would you mind getting up?" As much as I didn't want to stop holding her, it would be a bit tricky to work with her in my arms.

"I don't want to." She wrapped both arms around my neck and squeezed tight. A waft of something aside from the soap, a calming, herbal fragrance, hit me and cleaned out my memory.

What was I doing again? Oh, right, baking.

After I had Machina sanitize my hands, I got down to it. First, I dropped the sugar and egg yolks in the bowl and mixed them up with a whisk until they came to resemble something like mayonnaise in consistency. Then I added the flour and used a spatula to fold it in. Once the dough was able to retain its shape, I started rolling it into balls about the size of a five-hundred-yen coin and stuck a little cheese inside. With Machina's help, we soon had a whole array of balls lined up on a tray.

"Take it away, Machina."

"Takiing." She picked up the tray. I thought she'd spin off, but she instead started shuffling away like a person, careful not to drop our creations. Exactly what kind of system these two robots used to get around still baffled me. She popped the tray in the oven, giving me a few minutes to cuddle with my wife. Personally, I felt like I was doing my best to show my true feelings, but I still couldn't manage anything more than putting my hand by the small of her back. Sooner or later, I needed to grow the hell up.

Lana readjusted her arms and pulled herself even closer to me, flashing me a dazzling smile. I could never say no to that grin. I'd do anything for it. By the way, all of this was perfectly legal.

Damn, I could so easily stop caring about anything and everything. One could argue that deepening ties with a lady has more inherent value than delving deeper in a dungeon, no? From an evolutionary and masculine perspective.

"They're reaaady," Machina chirped. Fifteen minutes had already passed. My

man Einstein had hit the nail on the head—any time you spend with a lovely lady flies by.

“Oh, that smells heavenly,” Lana cooed in delight.

Machina picked up one of the balls to check its temperature and sent her taste-checking sensor through it while at it.

“What’s the verdict?”

“Eighty points.” She curled her hand into a thumbs-up and placed the tray of sweets in front of us.

“What are these?! What are they?!” Lana’s spirits soared. I’d had no idea she loved sweets this much.

“They’re egg cookies called *tamago boro*.” Everyone in Japan loved them, from tiny babes to adults hooked on the nostalgic taste. They were the only sweets I knew how to bake.

“*Aaah.*” My wife opened her mouth. *Wait, does this mean what I think it means?*

Machina flashed a note reading *Feed it to her* across her screen. Message received. I picked out one of the still-warm cookies and placed it on Lana’s tongue.

“What do you think?”

“Mm-mmm ♪,” she murmured, kicking her legs in delight. “More! I want another one, please!”

“On it.” Like a bird feeding his little chick, I shuttled her more cookies. My elven princess seemed to find them irresistible. Scratch that, she couldn’t stop. She munched and munched and devoured the egg cookies. You weren’t really meant to eat so many of these in one sitting, but feeding them to her was too much fun to stop. Her mouth soon dried up and she could swallow them no longer, but she kept stuffing them in until her cheeks inflated like a squirrel’s. I had Machina whip up some hot tea to serve her.

“Mmm, these are incredibly delicious.”

“I’m glad you liked them.”

“Likewise.”

Ms. Lana, would you kindly remove yourself from my lap? My private parts beneath your bouncing bum are almost at their breaking point.

“Excuse me, Mistress, but..... Hmm?”

“What’s the matter?” asked Lana. Machina approached her with a curious expression. Just as I was wondering why, she took Lana’s ryvius in her hand.

“Huh?” I blurted out. My wife’s magic had been restored back to pre—“rice balls from hell” levels.

“Hmm? Whaaat?!” she gasped, unable to conceal her own astonishment. “Oh! Perhaps this is—”

“Lana! Do you know what’s going on?!” Nothing would beat finding a way to quickly replenish her magic.

“Is this the power of our love? Of the bond between us?!” I pinched her cheeks at the ridiculous suggestion.

“Whaah ahh you doooiin’?”

“Excuse me a moment, if I may?”

“Go ahead, Private Machina.” Lana would never get to the bottom of it, so I passed the problem over to my assistant.

“I believe we most likely have the sugar to thank for this.” That seemed most probable, but something still wasn’t adding up.

“But I’ve been giving her carbohydrates almost every meal.”

“This is only a supposition, but perhaps elves’ bodies function differently from those of humans like you, Mr. Souya. For example, maybe any sugar they consume alongside dietary fiber can’t be absorbed and is therefore expelled from their systems? Or maybe their digestive tracts have a difficult time absorbing saccharides in general, with the exception of sugar made from a combination of sucrose and glucose? A variety of possibilities come to mind, but we’ll only reach any certainty after further inspection.”

“Lana, elves basically only eat vegetables, right?”

“Yes. Thinking back on it now, we’re not much different than rabbits or sheep.” Kind of a questionable take on your own people, huh?

“Have you ever had any sugary sweets before now?”

“Once, long ago, when I was still a little girl without any talent for magic.” While mulling that information over, I fed her another egg cookie.

“Mr. Souya, would you allow me to handle this matter? I will adjust our dietary configuration and create the most effective meal plan for restoring magic. I guarantee it.”

“You’re hired.”

“Leave it to me, boss.” Had we stumbled on an unexpected breakthrough?

[45TH DAY]

Early next afternoon, I had Bel and Zenobia come out to camp.

“So what’s this plan you mentioned?”

Lana took it on herself to answer Zenobia’s question. “There’s a secret rite taught in the Hoense School of magic called a ‘compound paeon.’ In simple terms, it’s a method that dramatically increases the potency of a spell through having several mages from different magical backgrounds chant as one.”

“Excuse me, Lana, but I’m not all that great at magic,” offered Bel, raising her hand.

“That’s quite all right, Lady Bel,” she reassured her.

“Please, there’s no need for the ‘Lady.’ You’re too kind.”

“Well then, Bel, how powerful your magic or Lady Zenobia’s is doesn’t much matter since I’ll be handling the incantation’s composition myself. All I’d like you to do is carefully choose the god or goddess to whom you’ll pray.”

Zenobia raised her hand. “What sort of spell should we use? Also, you can drop the ‘Lady’ for me, too.”

“Thank you, Zenobia. I’d like for us to try casting as many offensive incantations as we can today, in unison. That way, I can put together a good combination based on those fluctuations.”

“Isn’t there perhaps a more efficient approach? I’m sure we can’t really afford to waste all your magic, Lana.”

She puffed out her generous chest at Zenobia’s question. “There’s a proverb my master always used to quote which goes, ‘Those who fail the most step closest to wisdom.’ The history of spellcraft is an unending repetition of trial and error, of divine fury and miracles. Efficiency plays no part in any of it. And regarding my mana, Souya will find a way around that, so please don’t let it concern you!”

Bel and Zenobia clapped in appreciation.

“Now, I’ve arranged targets for us to practice on not too far away, so let’s head over there.”

“Yes, Miss Lana!” Bel followed her happily. Zenobia’s face remained impassive.

Machina and I watched the three of them head off into the meadow, then turned to our own preparations. I hooked a water bottle to a drone, sent it flying into the atmosphere, and had it hover as high as it could go.

“This isn’t very efficient, is it? Speaking of, haven’t you figured out how to make a fridge yet, Machina?”

“I do apologize, but the instructions in my database for producing refrigerants were corrupted, so it will still take some time. If Archimedes would agree to lend its help, however, that would be a different story.”

“Well, not much we can do there.”

Archimedes was the construction program inside Machina. Currently at around 70 percent repaired, it already possessed a fully functional personality, but it had been proving incredibly uncooperative. Part of the blame for that lay with me.

Not too long ago, I’d ordered Machina to dismantle Nightingale, the medical program still under repair at the time, to extract information I needed for Éa’s operation. Seeing this, the cooking program had gone ballistic. Machina had had no choice but to destroy it, too, and consume the information it held for herself. From Archimedes’s perspective, a human’s unreasonable request had

turned artificial intelligence personalities into cannibals. I could see why that might make the programs who'd survived the episode suspicious of me.

Suddenly, we heard a crack like thunder. It reverberated from the direction in which Lana and the others had headed. Evidently, they'd also gotten to work. Machina prepared some whipped cream from milk, butter, and lemon, which she—

“No peeking!”

“Aw, come onnn.” But rubbing her the wrong way would only come back to bite me in the butt, so I did as she said. I heard a *whiirrrrrr*-ing noise come from behind me. Just as I found myself without anything left to do, I got a message from Isolla.

“What's up?” I asked her.

“I have a progress report for you. Are you indisposed?”

“It's fine. Go ahead.” I settled into a seat. Lady Mythlanica jumped on my lap, so I started massaging her neck.

“As of this moment, eight parties have attempted to slay the dragonoise, and none have been successful. Like we anticipated, physical attacks have no impact on the beast. When it comes to magical attacks, the monster completely neutralizes all flamecraft, as previously reported.”

Truth was, we'd installed a camera and a data transmitter by the staircase the day before. As soon as any party descended to the tenth floor, it would send us the recorded video. I'd dispatched Arvin and Shuna down to the dungeon temporarily to set it up.

“However, a mage from the Hoense School did manage to leave a crack in the monster's shell by launching an ice spear at it. That may be the clue we need to plan our offensive.”

Ice, huh? I've never seen that kind of magic before, but I guess I'll ask Lana about it.

A series of successive explosions boomed in the distance.

“Squad Member Souya, we must defeat Dragonoise Mydranga at all costs.”

“Sure, if we can come up with a bright idea.” We were already on the second day of the allotted time, with all the odds still stacked against us. Personally speaking, that method of refilling Lana’s magic was already an excellent discovery. It would definitely give us a great advantage in our expeditions, so I didn’t want to get greedy.

“What’s the matter? This is unlike you. The Squad Member Souya I know is at his best when his back is against the wall, just as it is now. Put some spirit into it.”

“Isolla, why are you so gung ho about this?” The combat program I knew was far more cold-blooded and heartless. Not that Als had blood, of course.

“I wouldn’t say I’m particularly gung ho about it. But do you really want to see Sexual Predator #2 humiliate Sir Arvin? Do you? Well, do you?!”

“Obviously not, but as a leader, I’ve got to put everyone’s safety first.”

“Glory is just as important as security.”

She’s getting worse. Just a few days ago, she would’ve told me I could feed all the glory in the world to the pigs for what she cared.

Then an extraordinarily noisy blast rang out, startling Lady Mythlanica so badly that she sprinted off.

“I simply cannot bear to watch that good-for-nothing hero—chosen for no other reason than his stock—ridicule, slander, and taunt my dear Sir Arvin. Seriously, I wish I could just fu— [Audio signal temporarily suspended due to inappropriate language. Should this problem continue to occur, please contact your nearest dealer or customer service center] ...I’m sorry for the outburst.”

Is there really no way I can get maintenance to come out here?

“I’ll do everything I can to carry it through if possible. But I’m not going to do anything crazy. That’s not how my adventure goes.”

“You’re a tough nut to crack, aren’t you? How disappointing. Anyway, good luck. Over and out.” She cut the line.

“Machina.”

“Yes? How can I help you?”

“Does Isolla hate me or something?”

“No, but Sir Arvin happens to be exactly her type. I doubt she has any strong feelings for you.”

“After all the trials and tribulations we’ve been through...”

The robot hummed as she mixed the eggs and sugar together. *So neither of you is gonna care about my feelings? By the way, it’s been awfully quiet for the past few minutes.*

Looking out over the meadow, I saw the three ladies making their way back.

“How’d it go?” I asked Lana after she arrived.

“It was an absolute disaster!” she cheerfully responded.

“Let me see your ryviuses.” They showed me their vials: Lana had consumed about half her MP, and Zenobia’s was empty. Bel’s hadn’t gone down at all. *Wait, is Bel, like, actually amazing?* “Got it. Anyway, go on and take a break.”

“I-I’m exhausted!” Zenobia moaned as she sat down, then rested her head on the table. Of the three, she was the only one who looked totally spent.

All right, might as well get it ready for them.

I called the drone back and retrieved the water bottle, first slipping on a pair of gloves to protect myself from the frigid metal chilled high in the skies. We’d used silver coins to make it since silver is good at conducting heat. It warms easily and cools off just as smoothly.

After breaking the ice from the bottle into pieces, I poured it all into a big bowl. After throwing in a little water and some salt, I mixed it all together with cooking chopsticks.

“Sou, whatcha doin’?”

“Oh, you’ve piqued my interest, too.”

Bel and Lana came to spy on my work.

“If you add salt to icy water, the temperature drops like crazy. I’m using that to make something special. Machina.”

“On iiit.” She transferred the contents of her bowl to mine. The more I stirred,

the more the contents stiffened.

Whoaaa, it actually worked. Never thought that class in home ec all those years ago would come in handy.

I put the chilly, firm delicacy into individual elegant glass bowls, garnished them with young medicinal shoot buds, stuck a small spoon into each portion, and called it done. Lana and Bel stuck out their hands as if to say, *Pleeease*. Not one to reward bad manners, I placed the servings on the table.

“Kay, so here’s your ice cream. Enjoy.” They all took a bite at once.

“Whoa! It’s so cooold and sweet! Super sweet!” Bel exclaimed joyfully.

“Souya, drizzle a little liquor on this.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I’d seen that coming; I poured a little of the strong liqueur I’d set aside in anticipation of this over Zenobia’s treat.

“Mm-mm-mm! It’s sooo delightfully sweet!” A few tears sprung to her eyes.

As for Lana—

“.....”

—for some reason, she’d started inspecting the dessert from every single angle, turning it around as she dug in.

“No need to rush, ladies. There’s plenty to go around.”

“...!” They all gulped down a spoonful, then cradled their heads in their arms.

“Souya, serve me some as well,” demanded Lady Mythlanica. “Don’t hold back on the liqueur.”

“Yes, milady.”

I held a spoonful of the ice cream up to her, and she started licking it furiously. Then, just like the others, she got a brain freeze and rolled around in pain. Incensed, she bit me...only to start licking the dessert again. The three other ladies went through similar cycles of joy and agony as they finished their portions.

“What a terrifying treat,” breathed Zenobia. “I couldn’t stop eating even though my head was killing me. Heh-heh, my lips are trembling.” Her whole

body quivered.

“Ohhh yeah, that reminds me. Two years ago, the first time I ever saw snow, I went crazy and ate as much as I could. Ow, ow!” Bel shivered just like the mage.

“Mm-mmm, hmm?” Appearing relatively unbothered, Lana stared curiously at the vessel I’d used to make the ice.

“Darling, this is made of silver, right?”

“It sure is.” She was holding the water bottle.

“Precisely. Silver is a wonderful thermal conductor, so I welded some into a bottle.”

“Thermal conductor?”

“A term for metals that cool or warm with ease.”

“So why does adding salt make it so much colder?”

“.....R-right.” *N-no idea.*

“Allow me to explain. This is a phenomenon known as ‘freezing-point depression.’ One property of melting ice is that it lowers the temperature around it. Since it normally melts gradually, it almost never falls below zero degrees Celsius. Salt, on the other hand, quickens the pace at which ice melts. So when you add salt to ice, it not only rapidly melts, but drastically reduces the surrounding temperature. As a result, the air around it can drop down to between negative fifteen and negative twenty degrees Celsius.” A self-satisfied smirk appeared on her screen. It pissed me off.

“Oh, freezing-point depression. Right, right, those used to be everywhere, but I haven’t seen one since I was a kid. Really takes me back.”

“Freezing-point depression is not something you can spot like a dragonfly or crayfish.” Machina acidly rebuked my attempt at sounding like I knew what I was talking about.

“So conductive metals mixed with ice and salt can lower freezing points,” Lana muttered to herself as she paced around, then wandered off from camp. Before she did, I caught a glimpse of her ryvius and saw it had completely refilled. I checked Zenobia’s, too—maxed out. Evidently, sugar also helped

heims recover magic.

“Looks like ice cream was the right move, Machina.”

“Indeed. A fascinating development. The only problem I can imagine is that it may not carry well into the dungeon.”

“Could we make it into a milkshake?”

“Ohhh, possibly. But that wouldn’t keep for long.”

“Well, a good party is all about balance. We can’t just rely on Lana’s spellcraft all the time. I’ll be happy as long as we can help her get back to full power when she returns to camp.”

“Whoooa! My magic filled up again!” came Zenobia’s delayed reaction.

“Sou, you have moved me. Never in my life have I tasted something so sweet. I’m so glad to be alive. *Ughh*.” Bel started weeping. Talk about an overreaction.

“I knew you were pretty well off, but I never imagined you could throw sugar around this casually.”

“Actually, the king left me a stash of sugar. I just borrowed a bit.”

Both women gawked at me, eyes bulging in astonishment.

“Umm, Sou, so you mean—”

“Stop right there, Bel. This smells like trouble. It’s best we don’t get too deeply involved. The only evidence is currently in our stomachs. We can just play dumb and pretend we don’t know.”

“Yes, ma’am, Zeno! Since that’s settled, I’d like seconds, please!”

“After you cast a few more spells,” I told her. Lana had returned, her cheeks bright red, panting.

“I have an idea I’d like to try out. Bel, Zenobia, please come help me. And darling, lend me all the salt and silver you have. Machina, we’re going to need large quantities of water, so please go fetch some. Heh, heh-heh-heh, this might just turn out to be amazing. With this, I can finally step up my least favorite magic, icecraft. No, what am I saying? I might even be able to replicate the deathly winter that once blanketed the city of Neomia.”

Please, whatever you do, don't do that.

Zenobia and Bel recoiled a bit at the sudden change that had overtaken her. Both Machina and I had grown used to it, however, so we got started on her instructions without paying it any heed. We gathered the items she'd asked for and decided to observe their joint magic up close this time—and ended up completely bowled over in the face of the overwhelming size and force of her spell. Lana's face beamed with pride & satisfaction. On the other hand, Zenobia and Bel looked deathly pale.

"Machina."

"Yes?"

"I'm off to apologize to the king."

"Of course, and good luck. Don't worry, I'll prepare everything for your expedition. Please do make sure you find a way back here before noon tomorrow."

"I'll do what I can."

I arrived at the palace and immediately prostrated myself in *dogeza*, then followed up with a round of profuse apologies. Luckily, I got permission to borrow some muscle. I gathered all the mages of the royal court and every employee of the Zavah Night Owl Trade Group with time to spare and got to work taking the calamity we'd created apart. Only after evening fell did we clear the portions that blocked the main road.

Other trade groups brought a total of sixty-two complaints to me, but left chuckling with pleasure after I gifted them with some off-season ice. I arranged dinner for everyone who'd helped before going to update the king on our progress, but he refused to let me leave and made me stay for dinner.

Apparently, he'd taken a great liking to edamame and had munched on a large plate of the beans while drinking the alcohol I'd forbidden him from having. In a wonderful mood, he started recounting tales from his adventuring days. I took all the stories from this drunkard with a generous helping of salt, but nevertheless found them interesting and educational as a fellow adventurer. He told me about what Pops was like when he was younger, about

Lana and Éa's father, and about his younger sister who'd gone missing in the dungeon. But the night was not long enough to hear every one of Remlia the Adventurer's great sagas, and soon, the dawn broke—

[46TH DAY]

After a completely sleepless night, I made my way to the reception desk at the dungeon. Machina had contacted me first thing in the morning to let me know my party would meet me there. It was a short walk from the palace. Honestly, I was dead tired. The morning sun blinded me. I felt absolutely wretched.

"Everything ready?"

"I gathered all the items Mistress Lana requested—the three hundred pieces of silver, twenty kilograms of salt, and one sinispectral silver barrel of water—and had them delivered to Sir Arvin by way of the Zavah Night Owl Trade Group. I entrusted your share of the arrows I made to Lady Éa. Isolla drew up a battle plan and has already communicated it to the rest of the party."

I'd asked just to be safe, but it looked like every last *t* had been crossed. "Maaan, it feels like you guys don't even really need me."

"I concur."

You weren't supposed to agree.

"Yaya, good morning!" My little sister had arrived.

"Good morning, darling. I'm sorry about yesterday."

"Don't be—your magic is going to open so many doors for us. That discovery alone has made this all worthwhile. I'm really impressed, Lana. It's a shame the incantation won't carry your name, but I'm very proud of you."

"Th-that's too—" I stepped up to her and placed my hand on her cheek. She grew limp with embarrassment. Maybe my sleep deprivation was causing me to act up.

"Okay, okaaay, that's enough PDA for the morning." Éa stole her sister away from me.

"Mr. Souya," Machina warned in a low voice. "Your preparations and strategy

are perfectly in place. I have chosen not to divulge your potential success rate, as it never means anything to you. However, you should be aware of the possibility of losing someone in this battle. Please pay extra attention to this risk. With that, I wish you good luck and goddess-speed.”

“Thanks. See you in a bit.”

Lana, Éa, and I walked up to my counselor’s desk. She was a beauty, with horns that peeked out of her silver hair.

“Good morning, Evetta.”

“Pleasant morning to you, Souya. What are your plans for the day?”

“We’re going down to the tenth floor to investigate the damaged ecosystem there. Here’s our expedition request form,” I announced, handing her my signed paperwork. For what it’s worth, Arvin and the others had already gone down the day before to scout it out and send me their findings.

“Request approved..... Do you not intend to try your luck with the Dark Crowned monster?”

“Of course not. I’ve chosen to follow the safest path in adventuring. I would never put myself at such reckless risk.”

“A wise decision. In the last two days alone, seventeen parties have attempted to tackle the creature, yet only three have left anything resembling a scratch on it. And that was the most they could do. No one has come close to felling it. Four parties have broken up after their failed attempts at slaying the monster, and none of the seventeen have come away unscathed.”

Pretty terrible damage report. Initiates were clearly not cut out to fight this foe.

“I only wish the people who mistake recklessness for the essence of their profession could hear what you just said. Granted, there does come a time when one must engage in risky behavior. Please do keep that somewhere in your mind.”

“You’ve got it.”

“Well then, have a lovely expedition. Please make sure you come back alive.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

It hurt my heart to lie to my counselor, but we had to keep the elves’ involvement in this a secret for Arvin’s sake. I’d committed to keeping that promise the moment we’d agreed to work together. Nothing could make me break it.



Leaving Evetta behind, we ducked into a portal and settled in to wait for Arvin and the others on the tenth floor.

“Darling, um, I got this, um, for you, if you’d like... I mean, it’s not, um, very special or anything, but I just wanted to, you know.”

“Huh?”

Lana was making an anxious attempt to tell me something. She reached into her bag to almost pull it out before cramming it back in, to almost withdraw it again—but then put it back. Her younger sister looked on, slightly bemused.

“Actually, I think it’s best you tell him, Éa.”

“Nooo way, I’m not doin’ that. You said you’d do it yourself, remember?”

“But Éa...”

I could nearly feel a question mark floating above my head as I watched their exchange. Perhaps unable to stand her sister looking so troubled, Éa walked around Lana and started talking for her like a ventriloquist.

“I put my heart and soul into making these. I hope you like them.”

Flushing bright red, Lana pulled a clump wrapped in leaves out of her bag. “Th-this probably tastes like a mud pie compared to the delicious meals you always cook for us, but please, try it.”

I took the lump and unwrapped it to reveal...a rice ball. A message from Machina came in.

“The *onigiri* contains nothing but salt and rice. There is no cause for concern.” That made all the difference. I took a bite.

It was a little heavy on the salt and slightly tough, but the more I chewed, the more the flavor of the rice blossomed in my mouth. No self-respecting Japanese person could dislike white rice. If Lana had made it herself, it had to be good.

“This is really good,” I told her.

“R-really?! You’re not just saying that to be kind?”

“No, I mean it. I like it.”

“Really really?!” She closed the distance between us.

“Really really.” *Dear wifey, you’re very close. Look, I’ve already finished one.*

“I’m sooo glad to hear that! Um, I’ve made quite a few, so please, eat up!” She opened her bag to reveal rice balls jammed into every nook and cranny.

“Mr. Souya, she is carrying around forty *onigiri*. Please do not overindulge, as it will negatively impact your expedition,” warned Machina. As if I could eat that many.

“Umm, let’s share these with everyone. I could never finish them all on my own.”

“Okay, that’s a good idea.”

Soon afterward, Arvin and the others showed up with the barrel and other assorted baggage in tow. We kept our salutations brief and finished the rest of the rice balls. Claiming she’d grown tired of the taste, Éa started shaking random spices on her onigiri. Right on script, she, Shuna, and Bel began quarreling over who would get to have the seasoning. It made me happy to see Arvin munching unperturbed on his portions even after I told him Lana had made them.

Full stomachs, check.

Now

The time has come

To take that Dark Crowned Dragonoise Mydranga down

For a friend and his glory.



The enormous, yawning cavern was littered with mysterious armor and trappings that seemed to whisper of long-gone civilizations, derelict remnants of ritualistic equipment whose applications we couldn't begin to imagine, and countless altars exalting gods only knew what. From time to time, we encountered pockets like this in the dungeon, but not even all the years in the life of a long-lived race would suffice to unravel the cryptic history here. Not that it had much to do with us, of course.

The dragonoise slept curled up among the altars as if to protect them, just as it had when we'd first encountered it. This time, though, we also found traces of blood and weapons strewn around the area that hadn't been there originally.

But damn, this thing is huuuge.

Its body measured at least eight meters wide and two and a half meters tall, with a neck so long it couldn't completely retract into its shell. That I estimated was about ten meters in length, two meters across. At this size, it would no longer fit through the dungeon exit.

Wait, is it just me, or does this thing look bigger than three days ago? What has it been eating? Ohhh, adventurers, maybe? I won't ask for much, but please never let me get eaten alive by a monster.

"Good, everyone's in position. Let's check our transmitters. Give me a shout when I call your name." I'd affixed telecom stickers that worked as microphones and speakers by everyone's throat and ears.

"Lana."

"Here."

"Éa."

"Heeere."

"Arvin."

"Aye."

"Shuna."

"Whoa, this is freaky."

“Bel.”

“I’m heeere.”

“Zenobia.”

“*Why am I always last?*”

“Communication systems all clear,” I announced, then confirmed everyone’s positions. Lana, Bel, and Zenobia stood at the ready in the nearest corridor. A few paces in front of them, Arvin took the right flank, Shuna the middle, and Éa and I the left.

“Isolla, run through the last check.”

“Understood..... All in order.”

“Commence battle operation. Give it all you’ve got, friends. Éa, if you would.”

“*Roger.*” She rolled the barrel up close to the dragonoise so offhandedly, I started sweating with panic.

“É-Éa, quietly, quietly.”

“*It’s fine, it’s fine,*” she waved off my worry. “*This dope’s not the kind to initiate an attack.*” Unalarmed, she pressed forward slowly and steadily, the barrel making quite a lot of noise as it trundled. Once she got it in the right spot, she began spreading fistfuls of salt and silver coins around it in equal measure. *Ah, this is sloppy, too sloppy. I’m scared, I’m scared. My poor heart.*

“*Prep complete! Heading back now,*” she reported, then jogged back to me. The dragonoise watched her run away, but soon lost interest and returned to its slumber. Cold sweat drenched my brow. It felt like my heart had its foot down hard on the accelerator.

“*Sou, that thing’s not even worried about us. It’s like a pet,*” noted Bel.

“Maybe it hasn’t faced off against anyone up to its level yet?” I suggested. “Or maybe it’s just not that bright?”

“*I’d say both, no? Rock turtles don’t eat anythin’ but the dungeon walls, you know. Animals who don’t have to struggle for their grub are usually pretty dumb.*” That logic tracked.

“Arvin, make your move.”

“Aye.” I had him assume his post close to the creature.

“Lana, Bel, Zenobia, take it away.”

Lana thrust her staff into the ground, spread her arms out wide, and began to spin her words into an incantation. *“O Lord Ezeus, my lord Ezeus, I raise my voice in your wondrous name and pray you carry it to the following deities: O Midras of Shining Waters, imbue my right hand with your grace.”* A water globule took shape in her hand. *“Li Bau the Death Shade, grace my left hand with your destructive power.”* Ghastly white smoke swirled around her left hand.

“Unite as one,” she ordered, joining her hands together, *“and come to life.”*

When she spread her arms open once more, a massive spear of ice materialized between them. Icecraft was the magic Lana had the hardest time conjuring, so this single spell would drain her magic in one fell swoop.

“With this frigid lance, I hereby herald the coming of the winter of death. Hoense Romea Neomia!”

She ran a few paces, then hurled her creation with impeccable form. This got the dragoise’s attention. It flashed its eyes wide open and writhed its massive frame, instinctively and very clearly terrified of the spear. However, Lana’s aim flew true and hit a bull’s-eye, her lance impaling the beast where its neck met its body. The dragoise wailed in agony, enveloping the dungeon with a shrill shriek like grating metal.

“Ugh!” Howling audio feedback amplified through the speakers on my glasses assaulted my ears. “Zenobia!”

My ears were ringing too loudly for me to hear her response, but out of the corner of my eye, I was able to make out Zenobia pitching small fireballs at the monster.

The flames quickly fused to the frozen spear and caused it to explode, smashing the ice into tiny fragments and generating a white fog that choked the cavernous space.

“Éa, you better not miss,” I warned.

“Right back at you, Yaya,” she retorted. Syncing up our breathing, we nocked our ammunition. We’d crafted the arrowheads and even the shafts entirely of silver for this operation.

“Now!” We set them loose, aiming for the gash the ice spear had left. Both our arrows pierced the beast in almost the same exact spot. While they didn’t penetrate very deep, they did cut into its flesh.

“Okay, go, Bel!”

“M-my name is Beltriche, Divine Medium of—eek!” She was nervous, and her voice betrayed her. The beast fixed its eyes on her, Lana, and Zenobia, raised its long neck, and snapped at them as quickly as a round expelled from a cannon. It was a lethal blow. However—

“No, you don’t!”

—Arvin’s shield rammed into the beast’s jaw, stopping it in its tracks. Shudder-inducing fangs clamped onto the shield. The dragoise braced its serpentine neck to lift Arvin with it and fling him around, but Shuna slammed his sword against its scales before it had the chance.



“Dammit! I can’t cut through these!” he swore in frustration. His sword had indeed failed to slice through the dragonoise, but it had forced the beast to unclamp its fangs from Arvin.

Éa and I switched to our normal arrows and started assailing the monster with covering fire. We aimed for its eyes, but its neck slithered far too quickly for us to land a hit. The dragonoise shifted all its hostility toward Shuna and Arvin, then bore down on them.

“Bel, take it easy,” I reassured her. “We’ve still got plenty of time.”

“O-okay.”

Lana reached out to Bel, who was trembling under pressure, and grabbed her hand to wrap it around her staff. *“Relax and repeat after me.”*

“Eek!”

Lana began to chant, and Bel followed her lead. *“I, Beltriche, the Divine Medium, raise my voice in supplication to the gods and goddesses of modern days. My primary lord, Ukhazol, bend your divine ears to my pleas.”*

“I, Beltriche, the D-D-Divine Medium, pray to modern-day Ukhazol for a favor.” Kind of a half-assed chant, but it was the best she could do. The two continued.

“I beseech thee for power and beg thee and the succeeding gods and goddesses for a miracle. O Leteugan of the Frosty Winds, bestow unto me thy divine force.”

“I, I, I—beg thee and the following gods and goddesses for a miracle.” The elf whispered something into Bel’s ear. The tears running down the girl’s face dried, and all emotion melted away. Her words began to flow gracefully, as if spoken by an entirely different person.

“Leteugan of the Frosty Winds, grant this man your miracles and your grace. Dance, O Holy Wind, spring forth as a cyclone, and, like a swell-crushing storm, twist, spiral and enfold, destroy, and plunder all before you, then transform this scene to ice and resurrect once more the tragedy of Neomia! O wild and crazed tempests, ice-laden rains, shower down upon this beast! Freeze it and its every

last cry and send an icicle of death plummeting down upon it from on high!"

Her face showing the telltale signs of spirit possession, Bel unleashed the spell. "Laualliuna Romea Brinicle!!"

Mighty winds swirled the frigid shards into a whorl. I nocked a precious Mythlanic arrow and shot it straight through the barrel Éa had tipped over, detonating it on impact. The cyclone sucked up the sinispectral water, a magical amplifier, that had burst from the barrel and swelled in size.

"Arvin! Shuna!"

"Aye!"

"Here we gooo! Raaaaaaaaaah!"

Their shield and sword repelled the beast's sixth snap with perfect timing, catching it right in the jaw and forcing its serpentine head to whip all the way back to its shell.

"Raise the barrier! Now!"

Arvin lifted his heraldic badge of St. Lillideas while Zenobia heaved her staff.

"Magnificent Lillideas, bestow the graces of your mercy, your loyalty, and your divine protection upon your humble followers. Zammonglace Romea Teiring!"

"O Holy Flames, conjoin with these elements and form a wall of light. Shine tranquility upon them, sustain their spirits, and erect a protective barrier!"

The two defensive spells combined to form an enormous dome of light that enveloped the dragoise. At that exact moment, Bel's incantation reached its final stage. The melting ice mixed with the salt around it and instantly sucked all the heat from the area. Suddenly chilled to zero degrees Celsius, the air churned among the raging winds and rain, blanketing the dragoise in a sheet of white. The silver coins stuck to its shell, and the silver arrows piercing its wound absorbed the freezing cold to gnaw away at the beast from without and within. Even its wails froze on its breath.

And yet all of this was nothing but the lead-up for the next spectacle. Zenobia's light barrier radiated heat. Drawn to warmth, the chilled air swirled and gathered around the top of the dome, tumbling into a viscid, ivory vortex

that slowly lowered to the ground.

The overlapping forces of freezing-point depression, silver, sinispectral water, and a Divine Medium's prayers compounded one another to generate a miracle: the new spell Lana had invented. Brinicle, a medium-facilitated magical phenomenon, if you will.

This shit was crazy. According to Machina's observations, it produced absolute-zero conditions—the point at which every single molecule ceased to move. The ladies had failed to get the control on this just right the day before and had wound up transforming part of the meadow into a winter wonderland complete with a thirty-meter-tall column of ice. We'd had an escape route then, but that wasn't the case today. Still, Arvin's barrier, aka his defensive magic, kept increasing, so—

"Souya! Sorry—I can't hold on any longer!" cried the knight.

"Yeah, me neither!" Zenobia added.

They both threw in the towel far too early.

Shit, you can't be serious. If this thing hits us, we'll all be a bunch of ice pops.

"Bel, cancel your spell. Bel!Bel?!" She wasn't answering. I had a sinking feeling in my gut. I ran over to her.

"Freeze, freeze, freeze all blood and souls, stop them, stop them, cease all time and history, quell it, quell it, visit destruction upon—"

"Lana, is this one of those trances?"

"Yes."

The girl went on chanting, her eyes dead. Lana shook her, Zenobia clamped her palm over her mouth, but nothing worked. Time was running out. I didn't have a second to lose or spend wavering about what to do. I had no other choice.

"Sorry!" Not really knowing whom I'd apologized to, I held Bel's chin between my fingers and kissed her. Our lips pressed together. I was too terrified to look at my wife, but I could feel Éa's icy glare. I also saw Zenobia's eyes go blank in surprise.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. Still, nothing changed. *Ah, to hell with it*—I slipped my tongue in her mouth and swirled it around hers, licked the top of her palate with the tip, and glided it along the insides of her teeth. I had Tutu to thank for teaching me all these dirty moves.

“.....!”

Light returned to her eyes, and the magic behind me instantly dispersed. Then Zenobia slapped me back and forth across the face.

“Gh!”

“You predator! You’re a married man! Bel! Bel! Snap out of it! You’re not hurt!” Zenobia seized the girl by the shoulders and violently shook her back and forth. Finally, she regained consciousness.

“Gasp! Wh-why do I feel like something crazy just happened to me?”

“It’s too much trouble to explain now. Don’t you worry, I’ll make sure to steal a fortune back for your mental anguish!”

This was out of my control, you know. I did it to save all your lives.

“Darling.” Shit.

Lana quietly walked up to me, grabbed my poncho, pulled me toward her, and—gave me a peck on the lips.

“I-I’d like you to continue that later.”

“Yes, ma’am.” It all happened too fast; my emotions couldn’t keep up.

“Oiii, mind taking that lovers’ quarrel outside?” Arvin’s voice snapped me back to reality. That’s right, we were in the middle of a battle.

I turned my sights back on our enemy. Somehow, the dome of light had stayed intact. A frosty film of white snow left behind by the shattered death icicle covered the surface. We couldn’t see a thing inside.

“Arvin, go ahead and release your defensi—”

A split second before I could get my order out, the snake head busted through the barrier dome and sent him flying. He slammed into the wall and lost consciousness.

“KKKKKRRREEEEEEEEEEEEEEAAAAAAA!” The dragonoise’s death rattle boomed and bounced off the walls. Its injuries had already sealed its doom. Our silver arrows had split its body in half, affording us a glimpse of the frosted organs inside. Only the freezing of its blood vessels prolonged its death. Even if we didn’t do anything else, it would still expire.

And yet there is a saying that goes, “There’s nothing more dangerous than a wounded beast.”

“Lana, Bel, Zenobia, fall back!”

If they responded, I didn’t hear it. The dragonoise went berserk, writhing in agony, whipping its long neck around and around. I had to duck in and get Arvin out of there. That thing could kill me with just a single blow, but it would take more than that knowledge to stop me.

“Éa, cover me!”

“I am, but! It’s not work— Aaah!” The serpentine neck swatted her away, too, but it didn’t hit her straight on, so she landed on her feet. Without missing a beat, she loosed an arrow at it—to no avail. I kept raining them down on it, too, but none hit any vital spots.

The monster flailed and thrashed its neck near Arvin. No ryvius, no matter how full, could keep anyone flattened to a pancake by that thing alive.

Shit, this is bad. This is very bad. I’m all out of ideas.

“Haaah... What a mess. Looks I’m gonna have to save your asses, huh?”

“Shuna? You’ve got a plan?!”

“Yeah. Sorry, Master.” From far away, I saw Shuna draw his sword. His face was reflected in the thick blade. What was going on? I could feel some invisible power gathering around him.

“I am called Shuna, disciple to Lady Gladwein, honorable in both arms and strength. May a fragment of thy fearsome might reside within me. May my craft, my blade, my body itself carve out the newest legend to mark the ages in thy holy name! Grant me a blow to rival that heroic strike which slew the Wicked Dragon!”

The snakehead lunged at him.

“Huh?”

He vanished. The next second, he was standing atop the monster’s shell.

“Eaaaaaat thisssssssssss!”

Shuna delivered a divine strike with his gleaming longsword. Though it had frozen over and cracked, the beast’s shell still looked hard as rock—but the boy cleaved straight through it all the same. His sword, the price he paid for the awesome power, shattered into fragments like ice. With its final breath, the dragoise let out a howling wail.

And yet it still had not departed. Its neck, which had so wildly rampaged a moment earlier, stilled in the face of death, and the monster’s fury all homed in on Shuna. Its eyes and gaping jaw opened wide as if to say, *At the very least, you’re going down with me.*

“Shit!”

Without his blade, he had no way to defend himself. That’s when—

“Who’re you calling a mess?”

—Arvin’s voice sounded through our speakers. He came flying down, shield raised, high, high up above Shuna.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAGHH!”

Propelled by the velocity of his descent and the weight of his armor, Arvin plunged his shield downward with all his might. An intense, violent crash blasted through the dungeon. It trailed off into a faint metallic clang before silence engulfed all.

A heartbeat later, destruction stemming from the cleft Shuna had left branched out and overtook the dragoise. The beast’s limp, serpentine head collapsed with its tongue still flicked out, and its shell shattered into a million pieces.

“.....”

Nobody said a word. Lukewarm sweat chilled by the drafts of cold air swirling

about dripped down my cheeks. Kicking shards of broken shell out of the way, Arvin lent Shuna his shoulder and walked over, stopping right in front of me.

“Leader, it’s over.”

“Yeah.....yeah. Hey, guys, we did it?” was my half-witted response. I’d only gone into the engagement because I’d thought we could emerge victorious, but now that we’d actually done it, it just didn’t feel real.

“We did win, right?”

“Yeah, and we’ve got you and the others to thank for it.” Only then did my legs start shaking. One wrong step and we could’ve lost someone. We had so much to improve on—but that could wait for another time. For now, “Everyone, mission complete,” I announced. “We did it!”

Éa rushed over and threw her arms around me. The three other ladies walked our way, too. Wait, that figure walking behind them looked familiar.

“Never thought a party of initiates could take this one down,” said a small doll at my feet. About thirty centimeters tall and sewn from sackcloth, it had small wings adorning its back.

“Were you watching as well, Guildmaster?” Evetta asked, bringing up the tail end of the trail of ladies.

“Why are you two here?” I asked.

“Isn’t it obvious? Because it looked like it might be interesting to watch,” squeaked the miniature Guildmaster doll.

“Likewise,” added Evetta. Yikes, this wasn’t good. “But Souya, did you not tell me you would refrain from attempts to slay the dragonoise?”

“I need to talk to you both. Come here for a sec.” Leaving Éa with Lana, I pulled the Guildmaster effigy and Evetta over to a corner of the cavern. “Please don’t tell anyone that my party helped to defeat the dragonoise.”

“Huh?” They exclaimed in unison.

“If it came to light that Arvin fought alongside elves, it would complicate our efforts to earn him honor and glory. Please, I beg you. I’ll pay a bribe if that’s what it takes.”

“I see. Well, for starters, how about a hundred gold—” Evetta stomped down hard on the doll before it could finish.

“If you had asked me to misrepresent your feats, then I would have to decline. But if all you want is to hide your accomplishment, then I am willing to cooperate since it won’t negatively impact the Guild in any way. Souya, are you—and your party members—satisfied with that arrangement? Have you made sure to thoroughly discuss it on a plethora of occasions?”

“We’ve already settled the matter.” I’d made everyone agree to this condition when we’d first decided to work together.

“Then as your counselor, I have nothing more to say. I’ll call dissectors to collect the resources here. You may want to take your leave, Souya.”

“Thank you.”

Evetta smushed the doll under her foot, then walked away. I went back to rejoin the others.

“Lana, Éa, time for us to go. Looks like Guild craftsmen are on their way to collect these materials.”

“Yes, darling.”

“Rogeeer.”

“Hold up!” Shuna stopped us. *“Are we really gonna play this off like you had nothing to do with it?”*

“Exactly. We all agreed to that when we decided to work together, right?” That “we” had included Shuna, too.

“Well, yeah, but still. We never would’ve beaten this stupid turtle—or that giant skeleton—without Lana’s magic.”

“No, I alone could not have done this,” Lana disagreed. “I could not have cast that spell without Bel’s assistance.”

Shuna took that in, then closed in on me. “That’s exactly my point! It took all seven of us to do this—not one or four, but all seven! Badass people should get praised and talked about and have people be proud of them—no exceptions! Covering this stuff up just doesn’t feel right to me!”

In all likelihood, he was projecting his master's experience onto our situation. It was indeed a tragedy that the genius who'd trained this prodigy with the sword would get no recognition for her skill merely because she was a beastmaid.

But on this point, I could not back down, both for Arvin's sake and for the sake of my standing as a leader. Once I made a decision, I couldn't allow doubt to make me waver.

"Shuna, as your leader, I'm ordering you to never bring this up again. Lana, Éa, and I weren't here. The four of you slew that monster. That's the story we're sticking to, and it's not going to change. Do you hear me?"

"....." He glared at me silently.

"Answer me."

"If you're not here, then you can't order me to do anything."

"Shuna!" I barked, more dismayed than angry.

"Souya, enough." Arvin stepped between us, trying to defuse the explosive situation.

Nothing would ever get me to back down on this. No matter how masterful Shuna was as a swordsman, he was still just a child on an emotional level. He didn't have the capacity to empathize with other people's needs or rights. No amount of logic or reasoning would get to him. People with authority had to check him, even if that meant using a little force. If I backed down now, this would go to his head, and he would get cocky. And arrogance was the closest thing to a death wish in this profession.

Plus, I'd committed to serving as their leader whether it was from behind the scenes or out in the open. I'd strangle him with my own two hands before I let that kill him. Worst-case scenario, I could shoot an arrow through his leg or torture him until he got the message. If he still refused to back down after all that, I'd have to break him like a wild stallion.

"Alert. Unidentified persons approaching, most likely another party. If you intend to disband, do so now." Isolla's warning put a damper on the heated argument.

“Shuna, we’ll continue this discussion after we get back aboveground. But I’m not going to give in to any of your demands this time. Remember that.”

He angrily clicked his tongue in response. The elven sisters in tow, I had started to leave when—

“Éa, a moment, please.”

—Arvin called out to a most unexpected member of the group.

“Huh? What?” She couldn’t disguise her surprise, either. They’d never spoken to each other directly before.

Arvin knelt before her and raised his emblem. A silver accessory in the shape of the Greek letter phi, it served as both proof of baptism in the Church of St. Lillideas and a medium for conjuring spells. I’d gotten so worked up that I’d failed to notice that Éa’s ryvius had run completely dry. A trickle of blood dribbled down her leg.

“We cannot allow a scar to blemish your lovely skin,” Arvin said, then chanted a healing spell. A warm light shone over her skin and the cut disappeared.

“Th-thanks.” She sounded a little bewildered.

Lana, Éa, and I started out on our way home. Our adventure wasn’t over until we made it back. I couldn’t let my guard down just yet.

We’d defeated the Dark Crowned dragonoise, and yet my argument with Shuna had wiped away any sense of achievement that might have brought. I could only hope this wouldn’t lead to problems down the line, but I was worried. Not to mention—

“By the way, Yaya, you totally kissed Bel, didn’t you?”

“Koff!”

“And me after that,” added Lana.

“Then do I get one, too?”

“Éa!” Lana snapped.

—seeds of trouble were starting to sprout here, too.



We safely reached the Guild on the first floor of the dungeon just past midday, which was both the busiest hour and when fresh news would usually break. People congregated around the quest board to see the latest job listings posted. Some adventurers swung by to consult with counselors back from their lunch breaks; new applicants came to sign up; civilians popped in to submit job requests. For those and many other reasons the Guild would get rather crowded, but—

“Whoa.”

—this was something else. *It’s like double the normal crowd, right?* The Guild gave me convention hall vibes. I instinctively took Lana’s hand in mine.

“Éa, don’t get lost,” I warned.

“As if. I’m not Lala, you know.”

“It only happened twice,” Lana fibbed. It had actually happened four times already. She was the type of person who lost sight of everything around her when deep in thought.

“Hey, did ya hear the news?” I heard a passing adventurer call out.

“Yeah, you mean about the Dark Crown? They say a party of initiates took it down.” They were gossiping about us.

All the people swarming the place traded similar rumors about the new party that had slain the dragonoise.

“You’re joking, right?” “No, I’m telling you it’s true.” “Initiates wouldn’t stand a chance against that thing!” “But I saw a squad from the Guild’s resource retrieval team heading down.” “Nah, it’s gotta be a prank.” “They say one of Lady Gladwein’s followers did it.” “No way—not even a band of Hoense School mages had what it took.” “Took what?” “How?” “Crazy, pretty much everyone had given up already.” “Who else was in the party?” “Won’t know till we see ‘em.” “Tee-hee-hee, looks like a fierce new rival’s come to town, doesn’t it?” “My lady, you look quite pleased by the prospect.” “What’s their leader called?” “He’s got to be someone famous.” “This is bogus, I guarantee you.” “Must be a misunderstanding.”

After eavesdropping on a pretty thorough sampling of the conversations, we left the Guild.

“What should we do now?” I asked the other two.

“I’m starving,” moaned Éa.

“Oh, me too,” Lana seconded.

“Okay, then—”

“Squad Member Souya, you have an incoming call from Sir Arvin. I’m putting him through,” Isolla announced, then switched the line over to Arvin without waiting for an answer.

“Souya, can you three come to the boss’s bar? Let me buy you lunch.”

“Be right there.” Perfect timing. With the sisters at my side, I made for the Wild Ox and Silver Fox. The streets buzzed with adventurers talking about the party that had bested the Dark Crowned monster.

News travels fast—way faster than I’d anticipated. This could mean trouble. There are definitely gonna be some scumbags trying to poke holes in the story. Are we gonna be able to conceal the truth from them? Mess that up, and we could risk spoiling what we’ve accomplished.

I sorted all these issues out in my head on the way to the bar. Since we’d already passed the lunch rush, it was quite crowded. Just then a *rather entrepreneurial* beastmaid waitress came up to greet us.

“Welcome! Souya, I was waiting for you, you meow!” This particular problem had completely slipped my mind. Tutu enveloped me in a passionate hug, not seeming to care the least bit about Lana’s presence.

“That’s a warmer welcome than usual, right?” Éa casually noted.

“Darling, did something happen?” came Lana’s perfectly reasonable question.

“Mrs. Souya! I have to tell you, Souya—”

EYAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

“I—I helped her get away from this random thug who tried to attack her the other day,” I blurted out.

“Mrah?” Tutu tilted her head, confused. *Read the room, por favor!* Not even I knew what that meant. I was a discombobulated, tense bundle of nerves. “You never came back to see meow at the shop. I got so lonely looking for you, you know?” She rubbed her face against my cheeks.

Ohhh man, oh man, oh man. This girl just won’t take the hint.

“Where? Why were you waiting for him?” asked Lana, puzzled. Fortunately, it looked like she hadn’t caught on yet. In the next few moments, I had to figure out how to diffuse a ticking time bomb. As if that weren’t enough, I had to do it right after risking my life in battle, completely exhausted both physically and mentally, and all while running on zero sleep. You could say I was lying in the bed I’d made, but the extra thorns and razor blades on the mattress seemed like overkill.

“Lana, let me explain,” I started. “The shop where Tutu works is—”

“The Lowomen parlor, right?” Éa hit me with an impeccable stab in the back.

“Oh, you’re a Lowomen disciple?”

“Yes, me’am.” Tutu nodded happily in response to Lana’s question.

Completely ignoring the deathly pale shade I’d turned, Éa interjected, “Yaya, I’m hungry. Let’s order something.” She rushed us over to seats at the counter since all the tables were full. I put in an order for three with another waitress.

I should mention that Tutu still had her arms wrapped around me. I didn’t have the energy to shake her off, so I sat down still holding her. Her fluffy tail curled around me, her plump booty and supple, smallish breasts pressed against my body, but I could take no pleasure in any of it.

“You were saying?” Lana prodded.

“Oh, right.” The beastmaid proceeded to tell the entire truth, not a hint of guilt in her voice. “That night Souya came to the shop, we got mixed up in a lion-sized mess, but he risked his life to protect meow. He stood up to Lord Werner the Beast Hunter, a relative of the Second Pope. Werner is the hero who quashed a rebellion of five hundred beastfolk all by himself, killing every single one without even getting a drop of blood on him.”

That's not a hero, that's a butcher. Is genocide how you earn that title around here?

"But not even that meawfully scary man could scare Souya from fighting for a scraggly little kitty like meow. Not everyone can do that, you know. Mrs. Souya, your husband is a wonderful man!"

"Darling."

Here it comes—my death sentence. What's it gonna be, burning at the stake? Crucifixion? Lana did just add icecraft to her tool bag, so maybe death by icicle? At the very least, is there any way my life alone can settle this? I couldn't bear it if Tutu had to pay for my sins, too.

"Why didn't you share this with me?" she asked. "You did a commendable deed, you know."

"Huh?" I hadn't seen that coming. Where exactly in that story had she seen the commendable part? "Lana, you're not angry?"

"Why should I be? Oh, because you got into a fight with a hero? He's a heim hero, though, so I don't believe that would concern us elves."

Where do I even begin?

"Lala, you've got it all wrong. I think Yaya's trying to apologize for lying with Tutu at the parlor," explained Éa.

"I haven't slept with her yet! We didn't go all the way!"

"Hmm? But she's a Lowomen disciple, right?"

"Mrah? Souya, why are you apologizing to your missus?"

Both parties in this affair stared at me, completely baffled.

"Éa, help me out here." I haven't got a damn clue what's going on.

"If I haaave to. Thing is, I studied up a bit on Yaya's country, and they follow this rare kind of monogamy where the husbands aren't allowed to secretly see any other women, or go to brothels, or things like that."

"Meoooow, what a strange country." I'll give you that, but this isn't why.

"Éa, when did you find out abou—"

“Back up, though, Yaya. Do you even know what a Lowomen disciple is?”

“No, I do not,” I whispered softly, so very softly.

“I would have been happy to get you up to speed if only you’d asked,” Lana offered. *Sorry, dear. You’re the last person I’d ask.*

“Souya, you weren’t even aware of that? You’re not a kitten, you know. Lowomen followers like meow adore and follow adventurers, supporting them as servants of the flesh. Whenever I’m wearing my collar, don’t think of me as a person..... Hmm, this is hard to explain, but— Oh, I know! It’s like I’m a very expensive drink. No wife in the world would yell at you for having a little drink.”

Once again, I tried to slip in a word in my defense. “Just to set the record straight, I didn’t sleep with Tutu. A lot happened, but that’s the honest truth, Lana.”

“Oh, I see.” She didn’t really seem to care. Why? Why was I the only one reeling from shock here?

“Poor Yaya.” Éa patted my head. “Just so you know, Lala and I have different moms. We had eight mothers at one point.”

“That’s right. Thirteen in total, if you counted Father’s lovers.”

An image of their father came to mind. He sure got around for someone who looked so straitlaced.

“Anyway, that’s how it is, Yaya. You must’ve been worried about this, what, difference in cultural values? It’s okay, it’s all right. You’re just a man, after all, so we won’t get mad if you have a few women on the side. Elves do it all the time. It’s the woman’s fault for not keeping her man’s attention. Although I was pretty shocked when you kissed Bel.”

“However, Lanceil is where I draw the line. Also.....never mind.” Both sisters tried to cheer me up.

Huh, I guess I was getting worked up over nothing again. This isn’t my dimension. It’s obviously not going to have all the same common knowledge or values as the modern world. I need to snap out of this funk. We have a saying in my country that goes, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” So I guess

everything's okay, right?

Lana smiled warmly at me. "You have far less ryvius than most people, so you need to have a few plans to supplement that. Besides, lying with a follower of Lowomen's is recognition you've reached a certain status as an adventurer, you know."

"I would never play with a greenhorn with nothing to his name. We're not that cheap, you meow. You're about the only initiate I'd accept. That's something to brag about if you ask meow. Oh, but did you hear? They say a party of initiate adventurers took down that dragonoise everyone's been talking about. That party could definitely get into the Lowomen parlor."

Speak of the devil, that very squad arrived. I caught Arvin's eyes and raised my hand a bit in greeting. Bel stared daggers at me. Tutu, the source of her ire, got dragged away by the ear to the kitchen by another waitress. That's when Boss, the proprietor, approached the new arrivals.

"Arvin, I've heard everything. Hang on a second," he said, holding an enormous, long board all alone. "AIIII right, fellas, sorry, but I'm gonna need you to mooove!" He shooed off some people who yelled and griped in protest.

For some unknown reason, the boss hooked his foot around the corners of two tables to pull them close together—tables that, of course, had adventurers sitting and eating around them. The diners grabbed their drinks and plates just in the nick of time. The boss lay the long board over the two tables in the space he'd forced open, then set four chairs on top of that in a row.

"Arvin, Shuna, Beltriche, Zenobia, get up there," he ordered. "Today, you're our main event."

A stir swept through the establishment. After a bit of hesitation, Arvin and the other three did as he instructed and stepped onto the board, and each took a seat. Every single eye in the bar converged on them. Only then did I notice more people had flocked here. They couldn't all fit, though, so some looked on from an overflow group outside. Pride swelled within me, but I couldn't help feeling anxious that I'd lost the chance to talk things out with Shuna.

"Silence!" the boss roared, and suddenly you could hear a pin drop. "On behalf of the Adventurer's Guild and King Remlia, I, Rasta ole Rhasvah, hereby

announce that Dragonoise Mydranga has been vanquished. I shall now relay the names of the brave adventurers who slew this Dark Crowned monster.”

I spotted two knights of St. Lillideas in the crowd—that shitty His Heroicness and his loyal attendant.

“Party leader Arvin Forths Gassim, former knight of St. Lillideas. In admiration of your impenetrable shield, King Remlia has bestowed upon you the nom de guerre of Dragon Scale.”

The crowd cheered and the knights clapped approvingly.

“Arvin the Dragon Scale!” someone screamed.

“Arvin the Dragon Scale!” the rest of the adventurers repeated.

“Praise be to St. Lillideas!” and “Honor to this man’s master, Zammonglace!” added the pair of knights.

“Next, Shuna the swordsman, disciple to Ukhazol, King of the Tree Spirits, and Gladwein the Iron Arm. In honor of thy mighty swordsmanship, which rent the dragonoise in two, King Remlia has bestowed upon you the nom de guerre of Dragonshell Slasher.”

The crowd erupted into hoots and hollers twice as loud as what had followed Arvin’s announcement. A group of gruff men stood out as possible sources, all of them most likely fellow followers of Lady Gladwein’s.

“Shuna the Dragonshell Slasher!” Deep male voices boomed over one another in a chorus of praises.

“Cheers for the honorable Lady Gladwein!”

“May his master, Legure the Graceful, bask in this honor!”

“Here’s to this young swordsman’s newfound fame!”

“And to the newest dragon slayer!”

“To our brother in arms and in faith”—Lady Gladwein’s disciples raised a fist in the air—“glory be upon you!” The bar trembled with their roaring bellows and gusto.

Paying that no mind, the boss continued to present Bel and Zenobia.

“Beltriche of Azollid and Zenobia of Fosstark—in recognition of your devotion, support, and masterful magecraft, King Remlia shall send letters of recommendation for both of you to the Earthen Tower of the Jumichla School and the Hoense School’s Lighthouse Watchtower of the Deeps. Furthermore, regarding the issue of your party’s reward, given that the Dark Monster appeared on a shallow floor and left only minimal damage in its wake, you shall be awarded fifty gold coins.”

The boss laughed wryly. “However! Courtesy of King Remlia, all food and drink is on the house for you adventurers until first light!”

“YEEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” The room burst into an explosive roar.

Ohhh, now I get it. So this is why everyone came around.

“Now then—”

“A moment, please,” Arvin cut in, stopping the boss just short of ending the announcement. He stood up, faced the adventurers before him, and declared, “We did not slay this Dragonoise by ourselves.” *Wha—?*

“I would like to introduce you to the individuals who assisted us on this mission from the shadows,” he blabbed, letting all the world in on our secret. “Princess Laualliuna and Princess Éa of the Heuress Forest, as well as Souya, the Otherworlder, come stand with us.”

The elven sisters looked to me. I froze at the unbelievably sudden development. Coming on the heels of the lady quagmire, this pushed my brain past its limit.

“Go on, go on, Souya! He’s calling you, go meow!” Tutu came up to me and tugged my arm, and next thing I knew I was on the board, with Lana and Éa close behind.

“Without Souya’s masterful planning and the elven princesses’ magic and archery, we could never have defeated our foe. Praise and glory to their names as well!”

A murmur shivered through the congregation at Arvin’s announcement. But then—

“Hail Souya the Otherworlder! Hail the elven princesses of majestic beauty!”

—Tutu’s cheer broke the quiet, and a flood of applause rushed at us. Lana and Éa seemed not to know how to react but blushed at the praise. I stood there completely stone faced, frozen to the spot. The two knights turned on their heels; I soon lost sight of them in the crowd.

“You’re so cute! Nice boobs!”

“Gorgeous!”

“Gloomy four-eyes!” A few half-assed chants got thrown in with the rest.

My honorable adventurers, looks like you just want to hurry up and get to dinner, huh?

I gave the boss, waiting in the wings, the signal. *Let’s just get this over with, please.*

“All right, you lousy lot! Drink! Feast! Sing! Go wild!”

Waitresses came streaming out with loads of ale and heaping plates of food to resounding hurrahs and cries. After that, everyone dived into the feast like beasts pouncing on their prey. Liquor was followed by food followed by song. Drink, sing, eat, chug! A minstrel performed a ballad regaling Arvin and his party’s deeds. Aaand—a fight had already broken out. The infectious rampage spread even to those outside the bar. Was this going to last until morning?

Just another normal day in the Other Dimension, a world I’d grown mostly used to. But the excitement did not drown me. My voice quiet and piercingly cold, I called to Arvin.

“Arvin, review meeting tomorrow morning. Got it?”

“A-aye.”

I’d met my limit for the day.

CHAPTER 3

An Unraveling and a Mending

[47TH DAY]

When I opened my eyes, I found myself on some stranger's rooftop. Arvin and I shared Shuna as a little spoon.

"Yow—"

Ugh, my head is killing me. Damn, I reek of booze. What the hell? Where are we? Where are the ladies?Nope, can't remember a thing.

"Good morning, Squad Member Souya," Isolla chirped from Arvin's waist.

"Isolla, what happened here?"

"Well.....why worry about that? There's a public bath not too far away. I suggest you patronize it to rinse the sweat and dirt off yourselves."

Liking the idea, I shook the other two awake. As it happened, neither of them had any clear recollections of the night before, either. Shuna fell back asleep, so I had Arvin carry him for us. I checked my wallet and equipment to be sure, but I hadn't lost anything aside from a little money.

The Kingdom of Remlia was teeming with public baths thanks to its abundant springs and its inexhaustible stores of emiluminite, a kind of fuel source. Some were even coed, which no one even batted an eye at.

None of what I saw around me looked familiar. According to Isolla, we were in an upper-class residential neighborhood where merchants and elite adventurers made their homes, an area I wouldn't normally have occasion to visit. No wonder the buildings all looked so brand spanking new.

We turned up at the public bath to find a disclaimer designating it for men only. As it was still very early in the morning, we were the only ones in the dressing room and reception area aside from the employees. They evidently

also offered laundry services, so I left our clothes to them and paid up front for the cleaning and the entrance fee. It came out to three silver coins for the three of us. We locked our valuables in a steel safe that they carefully guarded for us. After hanging the key to open the safe on a string around my neck, I stepped into the sauna area.

We had it all to ourselves. It looked much like any other stone bathhouse, with two large tubs as big as pools and a small one filled with cold water to adjust the heat of the others. It had dried loofah-like plants and soap for scrubbing, chairs—oh, and two gorgeous ladies, a beastmaid and a heim, there to wash your body for you. Manners in this dimension also dictated you get yourself clean before dipping in the tub.

The two ladies cooed seductively as they approached Arvin and Shuna. Predictably, their conversations revolved around the Dark Crowned monster we'd slain the day before. I hadn't anticipated the news would find its way out here so quickly.

Shuna turned beet red as the beastmaid rinsed off his back. Arvin and the heim whispered in soft, sultry, R-rated tones. Her hand snaked down toward the space between his legs. And I...well, I sat there scrubbing away all by myself.

Once clean, the three of us lowered ourselves into the tub. The water ran a little hot but felt nice and soothing. Arvin and I both stopped Shuna from swimming around. After a shoulder-deep soak in the warm bath, we competed against each other to see who could stand to stay in the cold water the longest. That soon started to get ridiculous, though, so we warmed up in the regular tub once more and left.

Our clean laundry awaited us. I slid my arm through my crisp, dry fatigues and retrieved my weapons. My stomach let out a low *grooowl*. We'd just spent the whole night there, but I decided it'd be better to head back to the boss's bar instead of chancing some random place and winding up with angry stomachs. After we got to the place, we bid good morning to the waitresses we recognized, took our seats, then ordered an assortment of food and drink. It wasn't bad, per se. The usual flavors, made with quality ingredients, satiated my hunger.

“So.....” We’d reached the laid-back moments after a meal ends. Both Arvin and Shuna washed away the last lingering flavors of their food with a beverage. Then, finally, “Why the hell did you tell everyone we helped you?!” I pressed.

“Took you long enough to ask.” An uninterested tone tinged Shuna’s voice, as if this didn’t involve him. It pissed me off.

“Well, I had a reason.” *Yeah, I’d hope so, Master Arvin.*

Still: “We all promised to keep this secret when we teamed up, right?! You’re supposed to keep your promises! That’s what they’re for!”

“All right, all right, Souya, take a breath. Let me start from the beginning.” Arvin raised his hands as if in surrender. Shuna haughtily turned away, clearly peeved.

“Right. First, let’s look at Shuna’s strike that cleaved the dragonoise in half. We can start there.” I had to hand it to the kid, that was incredible. Also, he should’ve told me sooner if he had that kind of trick up his sleeve. If I’d known, we might not have had such a tough time of it.

“That blow, the ‘Hero’s Strike,’ traces back to Gladwein’s most famous legend and has the power to destroy any enemy with draconic roots,” the knight explained. “You’ve heard of how she felled the Wicked Dragon, haven’t you?”

“Yeah. Her weapon broke, so she had to kill it with her bare hands, right?” A truly inhuman move.

“Technically, no. Gladwein sacrificed her own weapon to fatally wound the dragon, then finished it off with her bare hands. Shuna reproduced that legendary blow. It was a miracle, one you couldn’t execute with half-baked talent or any old blade.”

“Was it magic?” If staves and heraldic badges functioned as media to conjure mana, then it stood to reason you could entreat the gods and goddesses to deliver a miracle through your sword or skills.

“In a sense, yes. It only uses the smallest drop of mana. Our duty as disciples is to recreate the legends and histories of the gods with whom we’ve consecrated a covenant. Regardless of what they might want, followers get roped into the same fate that befalls their deity. Whether you’d call that a

miracle or a curse is up to the person living through it.”

“Art thou willing to plot against the royal and slaughter the heroic?”

Those were the vows I’d pledged when I consecrated my covenant with Lady Mythlanica. Did this mean I would get dragged into her destiny? I had, in fact, already attempted to murder a royal. But was I meant to do that second part, too? Not a chance.

“Shuna inherited his sword from his master. Its origins are a mystery, but it was made of immaculate steel. Unfortunately, its inscription was scratched away, so we don’t even know the name of the bladesmith who forged it. And given how thoroughly it was destroyed, it can never be repaired.”

If memory served, his sword had shattered into tiny fragments. Even if we gathered all of them and tried to put them together like a jigsaw puzzle, we might not ever have all the pieces.

“That blade had more to it than steel. It carried memories of a beastmaid who washed ashore all alone on a remote land, of every blade she crossed, the many years spent at her side, the care she devoted to a young boy, and the blow that rent a dragonoise in two.”

“.....That makes sense.” I still couldn’t see where this was going, though.

“Right. So here’s the main part of the story. Shuna’s master, a beastmaid called Legure the Graceful, has ties to my own master, Zammonglace.”

Looks like this is a small world after all, too. Wait, don’t tell me—did Pops know about this when he put us together?

“My master mentioned her only once over drinks one night. He told me there had been a family of beastfolk convicted of a crime that remains unclear. One of the magistrates arrested, toyed with, and executed them all—the same old story. Except this time, someone started murdering the magistrate’s guards after that, one by one, day after day. The surviving members of his unit went half-mad, worried they’d be next, and the magistrate came crying to my master for help. As an official knight of Ellusion, my master couldn’t very well turn him away. And regardless of the circumstances, he couldn’t leave a murderer on the loose.

“Zammonglace took his apprentices out to search for the bandit and came upon a young girl, a beastmaid with a longsword far too big for her across her back. Apparently, my master’s apprentices failed to take her seriously and paid for it in defeat within a matter of seconds. Luxgarre, much younger at the time, was one of those apprentices. For the record and these knights’ honor, I assure you our training is not so benign as to produce soldiers easily defeated by a momentary slip of caution. They just happened to face an extraordinarily formidable opponent. After neutralizing every single guard, the young girl stood before my master and apparently said, ‘Neither of us will come out unscathed if we cross swords. I’ll give you my right arm—in exchange, let me kill that man.’ After much wavering, Zammonglace attributed the official’s death to illness and took the one-armed young girl as his consort.”

Hmm? Mr. Zammonglace? I hadn’t pegged you as such a lecherous man, my friend.

“That’s disgusting. It’s indecent.” *Shuna, I couldn’t agree more.*

“That said, the ‘consort’ title was merely a cover to placate onlookers. The only way people with any social standing in Ellusion can keep a beastfolk person close to them and avert public scrutiny is by labeling them a slave or a consort.”

“Hmph.” That apparently did nothing to placate the boy, who looked irascible. I could see why. It must have been one messed-up roller coaster of a ride to learn that your crush had been someone’s on-staff lover. The fact that the other person in that equation was your party member’s teacher only complicated things more.

“My master told me he one day asked Legure, ‘Why did you draw your blade for that family of beastfolk?’ This is the most stunning part, but she apparently did it because they had once given her a loaf of bread when she’d been starving. I know the misery of starvation all too well. But to risk your life over a mere loaf of bread and sacrifice your right arm without a moment’s hesitation—that sort of conviction is unfathomable from a knight’s perspective. Still, everything about her, from her blade to her skills with it, was entirely authentic. As my master tells it, she eventually disappeared from his sight without so much as a farewell. Fate is such a curious thing, though. Who could have foreseen it would bring us here together like this?”

“Yeah, my master was a little too thin when I first met her, too,” Shuna recalled, staring off into the distance. “I wonder if she’s eating enough.”

“All that lengthy preamble is to say: Shuna’s Heroic Strike deserved to be praised, along with his master. That was never up for debate. But the moment we recognized Legure, I essentially announced to the public that I’d been working with a beastmaid’s disciple. I knew this would displease Sir Werner in particular, so I decided I’d disclose that I’d teamed up with elves as well.”

“The hell?” *Hold up, that makes no sense.*

Shuna’s master had shared an intimate relationship with Arvin’s, but the knight could have brushed that off with any number of excuses. It wouldn’t have left more than a scratch on his reputation. So why did he have to turn that scrape into a fatal wound by exposing he’d teamed up with elves?

“Souya, this is the comeuppance I deserve for the sin of becoming a knight. I shudder to consider how stringently and fastidiously they execute their intolerance of anything ‘other.’ There’s the war against the Black Elves, the internal battles for dominance among the popes, enslaved beastfolk and heim rebellions, and a mysterious disease infecting every corner of Ellusion. The knights deceive, murder, burn, and lynch the very citizens they are sworn to serve. The corruption runs so deep that both the Church of St. Lillideas and her knights have come to symbolize terror and death at the stake. I’ve heard distant rumors that my master could no longer bear to watch and left the Central Continent outright.

“The way things stand now,” he added, “parley with someone in any way associated with beastfolk would mark me as a deviant. A reputation once tarnished has no further left to fall, no matter the toll of dishonorable deeds. That’s why I disclosed my relationship to the elves. Forgive me. I feared you would see me in a different light if I confessed the true state of knighthood in my country.”

Yeah, probably—but then again....

“Look, Arvin—”

“What the hell do I care about all that shit?” Shuna cut in. “Don’t go writin’ us off like that. Plus, you’re an *ex-knight*, aren’t ya? All that’s got nothin’ to do with

you. And I'm not just gonna drop someone who I've trusted with my life like a piece of trash."

"Shuna, you really are still a child," sighed Arvin.

"The hell'd you say?" he growled, enraged. I had to agree with Arvin on this one.

"People hate every last drop of blood in the bodies of those they despise," he explained. "Actually, that loathing extends to anyone who's ever dirtied their hands simply by knowing the targets of their fury. It would have been better for you all never to have had anything to do with me."

"Then we're already screwed."

"It's just a metaphor. I'm not asking you to commit yourself to tha—"

"Arvin," I interrupted, trying to swerve the conversation away from crashing into unsavory territory. "I have a question. Now that you've admitted to working with elves, how exactly are you planning to plead your sister's case?"

Did he not see the looks Werner and Luxgarre shot him as they left? Those eyes saw nothing but an enemy.

"How do you imagine King Remlia went from adventurer to king?" he asked in response.

"He went on all these heroic expeditions and—" I was foggy on the details. His Highness hadn't mentioned that part over drinks the other night.

"Of course, nothing would have been possible without those daring deeds, or the discovery of the previous marquis's wrongdoing. But the reason Ellusion supported this mere adventurer's claim to the throne lies in this: Remlia ole Armaguest Rhasvah.

"The Armaguest part of the king's name refers to *something* he obtained deep in the Tower of Legions, though that is all I know. But what if the Church of St. Lillideas wanted to keep that secret *something* hidden?

"There's a mystery I've been pondering over for a while. There are countless dungeons in this world, yet the church has from times of old always sent a disproportionate number of knights specifically to the Tower of Legions. In

other words, somewhere within this dungeon slumber the second and third Armaguests.”

“Arvin, that way lies peril.” Far too much of it.

Searching for something you had no reliable information about was reckless in itself; hopeless, even, considering the time I had left here. And assuming we could find it, would Ellusion even consider negotiating with us?

The way I saw it, whatever that Armaguest thing was had the power to shake the church’s foundations. It would probably disappear us and be done with it. Without an exceptionally clever political strategy or powerful allies, a few random people would never stand a chance in a battle against an entire nation.

“Souya, I’m fully aware of the risks involved. But let me ask you this: How many days has it been since we began to work as a party?”

“Hmm? Uhhh—”

“Forty days, Sir Arvin,” Isolla informed us.

“Right, still only forty days. And in that time, we’ve distinguished ourselves among the parties which formed at the same time. Nothing about us, from our battle prowess, strategical calculations, economic power, and connections to the engagements we’ve waged against the Skeleton King and the Dark Crown fits the description of an initiate party. Souya, exploring the dungeon with all of you has convinced me of a few things: that this party has the potential to accomplish remarkable feats and that our names will go down in history. I believe we could earn the honor and glory to mobilize an entire country. Together, *there is nothing we cannot do.*”

He overestimated us. I wanted so badly to throw a wet blanket on Arvin and his passionate speech, but I couldn’t speak. Maybe his speech inspired a humble pride in me, or maybe I wanted to live up to my friend’s expectations. No one had ever had this much confidence in me. Up until now, I’d just gritted my teeth and done the best I could. At the same time, if we’d let that internal discord keep festering, it could have slowly ripped us apart at the seams and led us to our deaths. Our party would benefit if the seven of worked together out in the open. However—

“Arvin, are you sure about this? Your original goal to save your sister has gotten even more complicated, you know?”

“I understand that.”

“But—” Shuna kicked me lightly.

“You’re the only one who won’t shut up and accept it. You’re so frickin lame, worryin’ like that. Éa and Lana said okay right away, you know.”

“Seriously?” They’d go behind my back like that?

“Well, they said they would defer to you.”

“That makes more sense. Don’t scare me like that.”

“Tch!”

““Don’t click your tongue at people!”” Arvin and I scolded Shuna in unison.

You’re pretty famous now, you know? Act like it. I know you’re a kid, but don’t be childish.

“So Souya. What are you going to do?”

“Hmm, yeaah.” I covered my eyes to consider his question. But honestly, I didn’t even have the stamina left to think. This had been settled from the start. Arvin had stayed steady and true ever since I came to this world. We’d just have to think on our feet and put all we had into doing everything we possibly could.

“Let’s do this, all seven of us. But this time, we’re one party.”

“Aye.” For the second time, Arvin and I shook on it. “So now you’re officially our leader, Souya.”

“Yeah. I can’t promise I can do much, but I’ll try my best.”

“In that case, forgive me for cutting right to the chase, but we’re going to need you to reregister our party, pay the Guild our taxes, and get either them or one of the trade groups to give us good prices on the dragonoise materials, if you would.”

“.....Hey.”

“Ha-ha-ha! I swear, I hardly knew how to react when they asked me how

much I wanted for each part by weight. I was at my wits' end!"

This asshole—did he just shove all the leader stuff onto me because he couldn't be bothered? No, that can't be it. Can it?

"Leader, could you get me a new sword? I need it *exactly* the same size as the last one. It'd be great to have three extras, too. I won't ask for the moon, but I want them in Lumileux steel. Oh, and bring some shrimp pizza along on the next expedition. I want one that's fresh outta the oven and super cheesy."

"Don't hold your breath." Didn't take him a second to go off the rails. Arvin wasn't far behind.

"Leader, Zenobia's got tabs open at a few bars, so make sure you settle those for us. Oh, and I wanted to send my shield and armor in for maintenance, but the last smithy closed down. Can you find a skilled, cheap blacksmith to do it?"

"Oi." Zenobia, why're you running up all these tabs? And hell if I know anything about blacksmiths. Guess I'll have to ask my gentleman friends at the Zavah Night Owl and Ellomere trade groups.

"Oh, and one more thing."

"There's *more*?!" The cavalier way he was rattling all these items off gave me the nervous sweats. In a way, it probably made sense for me to take over at this point. I didn't even want to think about how deep in debt we could have fallen if I'd put it off any longer.

Just when this summary of all the work I would need to tackle had me exasperated, I heard, "Huuuh? Some party of initiates bagged that Dark Crown? Big whoop—that ain't nothin' but beginner's luck."

"Wait, you didn't hear? Word is one of 'em was Gladwein's disciple."

Or so I heard the conversation behind me go. Strangely enough, it's always the shit talkers who have the loudest voices. Guess they just don't even realize how rude they are.

"Glaaadwein? Ohhh, right, right. You mean that whore who made some excuse about her armor breaking and jerked a dragon off to make it her bitch, yeah? I mean, what kinda slut goes around waving her ass and pantin' at a big

ol' lizard? Ba-ha-ha-ha!"

Daaamn.

Stealing a glance behind me, I saw two men. Their dingy raiment intimated they were no amateurs but more likely failed mercenaries. Judging by the fact that only their adventuring equipment looked brand-new, they'd probably switched over to this line of work relatively recently. In other words, they hadn't spent much time here yet.

Figures. No one halfway decent in our line of work would dare run their mouth about a god or goddess in this town—especially not one with such hot-blooded disciples. Do these guys really not notice all the adventurers—including Shuna—getting up from their chairs and closing in on them?

"Wh-what's your problem?" They'd finally caught on. Lady Gladwein's followers looked at each other in the ring they'd made around the men, trying to decide who'd get the honors.

"Right, Shuna, you're up."

"Understood."

A middle-aged beastman gave the boy the order; everyone but him took a step back.

"What in the—? What the hell d'ya want, Little Miss Redhead?"

"The fu—?!"

Ohhh man. He just had to use the worst word possible.

Shuna rammed his fist into the face of the guy who'd made the grave mistake of addressing him like a girl, spun him around about three times, then slammed him into the ground, face-first. Still not satisfied, he started wiping the dude's mug across the ground like a dirty mop.

"Y-you bastard!" The guy still sitting jumped up with astonishing speed, unsheathing the longsword at his waist and swinging it down on Shuna in one swift motion. Seeming almost too bored to move, Shuna reached over his shoulder and—grabbed nothing but air.

"Ah," he sputtered dumbly. The fool had totally forgotten he didn't have his

sword. In that brief opening, the other man's blade came within lethal striking distance. *Shit*, I thought, but just then, Arvin shot out his arm to catch the blow on his armor, then kicked the guy down and stomped on him.

"This came to mind back during the dragonoise fight, too, but your endgame needs serious work," chided Arvin.

".....Arvin. You messed up big-time." Shuna looked anguished.

"Hey, you, *reject* knight." The same middle-aged beastman gave Arvin a withering glare. "You do realize you've tarnished our pride, don't you?"

"Huh?" both Arvin and I blurted out in confusion. Shuna cradled his head in his hands, though I was sure he hadn't been injured.

"Gladwein disciples handle our fights alone. You get in big trouble if you interrupt one."

"Huh? What do you mean?" I asked, but he cut me off to address my party member.

"Shuna, you're going to need to wash your dishonor off with your own hands. You know what to do, right?"

"Yes."

"Wait, what's going on?" This could not be good. A menacing energy supercharged the air.

Turning to Arvin, Shuna muttered, "Arvin, fight me."



Lady Gladwein's quarters sat tucked away close to the Kingdom of Remlia's western gate. She'd ostensibly set up a fort there to be the first line of defense if any foreign enemies attacked—but I think that in reality, she just wanted to be the first on the battlefield.

The two-story residential complex wrapped around a central training ground that for some reason, maybe to prevent injuries, had sand layered over it. Of course, it also had a stockpile of basically every weapon you'd ever need for training to fight in this world. You could tell how deeply the disciples' respected

the tools of their craft by how thoroughly they organized and maintained them all.

The place reeked of blood and sweat, which brought me back to my old kendo studio. Shuna and Arvin stood off in front of one another in the center of the training pit. About twenty of Lady Gladwein's followers looked on, plus me.

How did we get here?

"We will now commence the duel between Dragonshell Slasher Shuna and Arvin the Dragon Scale. The battle stems from Arvin's actions, which tarnished the honor of one of our own. Both of you, keep this a clean fight that will not bring shame upon your respective gods and goddesses. Do not take your opponent's life. Put your pride on the line. Whoever forces their opponent to concede defeat or lose consciousness first shall be declared the winner," the middle-aged beastman declared. "Any objections?"

Just a few, but he'd ignored every objection I'd brought up on the way here. The biggest problem was—

"A question. I tried and failed to pass Lady Gladwein's trials. What would happen if I defeated Shuna, an official disciple?"

—how pumped Arvin had gotten about this.

Stroking his long beard, the beastman responded, "Fair inquiry. I would not dare mistrust milady's judgment, but if you come out on top, you'll have proved your worth, and I will plead your case to her."

"Very well." He laughed darkly.

Shuna hadn't said a word. Looking resentful, he then asked, "You sayin' you think you can beat me?"

"I'd ask you the same," Arvin shot back, raising his wooden sword and shield. The boy had seemed rather reluctant up to that point, but he shook all hesitancy off and drew his own wooden sword.

"Now begin!" The two lunged at each other.

So you're just gonna ignore every last one of your new leader's warnings, aren't you?

“All right, lads! Place your bets!” the beastman boomed, then started taking wagers on which of the fighters would win. It rubbed me the wrong way for some reason. For all their talk of honor, these guys just wanted live entertainment. “C’mon, boys! Put a few coins down on Lord Knight, too! This bet won’t be worth anythin’ if we all go for Shuna! Hey, how about you? Who’s your money on?”

Firmly ignoring the infuriating fellow, I turned my attention on Shuna and Arvin. Shuna had the upper hand in terms of attack, while Arvin had the more solid defense. Not only was Shuna missing his beloved blade, however, but the wooden one in his hand also weighed very little. His combat style hinged on his putting his entire body behind a heavy weapon, then exploding at his enemy from below with a low-angled, difficult-to-parry strike. In essence, he practiced an irregular kind of swordsmanship. Now, however, it was as if one of his wings had been torn off. Plus, much of the power behind unusual techniques like his lay in the element of surprise. Once your opponent learned to read your movements, the potential damage you could inflict was halved.

Arvin, on the other hand, had mastered an orthodox, one-on-one way of the blade. He simply used his shield to deflect an attack, then countered with his sword. He did, however, knock people to the ground or slash at them with his shield as well. His firm grasp on traditional skills gave him freedom to apply and remix them however he liked to devastating effect. He’d fall short of nonhumans in some respects, but he had unwavering strength before a human opponent.

I didn’t place any bets, but figured the odds leaned in Arvin’s favor. His shield shut every one of Shuna’s blows down, and the knight hadn’t even budged behind it. The way I saw it, the crucial difference between these two lay in their body types. That included more than just their height; it meant their weight, build, and muscle mass. If they kept clashing against each other head-on, the duel was as good as over.

Still, if Shuna didn’t have what it took to turn that weakness around, he’d never have been able to stand toe-to-toe with either the Skeleton King or the dragonoise. After about the tenth time their blades clashed, he shifted his stance. Holding the butt of the sword in his right hand, Shuna lightly gripped the

rest of the handle with his left. He took a huge leap backward, then sprinted at Arvin as if drawn by some powerful force and thrust the weapon at him.

That strike Arvin dodged; he'd judged that the brittle wooden board he had for a shield would break on impact. It was the wrong move. Shuna dropped his blade and grabbed Arvin's shield. Then he stepped on Arvin's knee, clambered onto his shoulders, and jumped as if from a diving board. With astounding grace and spring, he executed a beautiful tumble through the air. Coupled with the velocity of his leap, the spin's centrifugal force enabled Shuna to pummel Arvin with a kick that crushed the wooden shield and sent him flying.

"Yeaaaah!" the peanut gallery roared. It had taken me aback, too. Had he always been able to pull off acrobatic stunts like that? Still, while Shuna's kick had tossed him from his spot, Arvin was otherwise basically unharmed. He broke his fall with relative ease and brushed the footprint off his breastplate.

"Hmm." I wasn't quite sure why, but Arvin threw down his sword. Then, piece by piece, he unhooked and removed his armor.

"Huh?" Shuna looked just as baffled.

"Now we're even." Freshly stripped of all his armor and in now much lighter gear, Arvin cracked his knuckles.

"Bring it on, dumbass!" Shuna took the bait, got riled up, and rushed headfirst toward his opponent.

"Ah, that idiot!" groaned the beastman.

Just as he'd feared, Arvin's perfectly straight jab caught Shuna flat in the face. Shuna had shot out his fist out, too, but his arm couldn't reach all the way. That one hit could not have stopped the duel even if Arvin had wanted it to; instead, it marked the start of a full-blown brawl. Fists pounded against flesh, blood sprayed in all directions, bones crunched, and both their ryviuses drained at a steady clip. Shuna ducked a punch, plowed into Arvin's chest, then hooked him in the side.

"*Rgh!*" The knight kicked the boy away using his physical stature to keep the upper hand. Worked up by the no-holds-barred scuffle, Gladwein's disciples howled even louder.

“Shuna! Don’t stop those legs! Keep moving!”

“Hey! Knight! His legs—take out his legs!”

“The eyes! Go for the eyes!”

“Gouge out his stomach!”

“Bust his jaw open!”

“C’mon, show us a *real* rumble!”

That’s when the last of my patience ran out. I kicked up the sword Shuna had dropped and nocked it to my bow.

“Hey, wait, what’re you—” The beastman spotted me, but I gave zero shits.

“Arvin!”

“Wha—?!” I released the wooden blade. It whacked him right in the temple, just as I’d intended. He fell to his knees, then blacked out.

“What the hell, Souya?” Shuna demanded, stomping over to me. Without saying a word, I put my hand on his shoulder and swept his feet out from under him. “Wha—”

From there I held him down, digging my knee into his neck and putting all my weight behind it.

“?!?!?” He patted my leg over and over to tap out, but I ignored him. Soon enough, his hand flopped over.

After making sure they were both down for the count, I—

“You bastaaaaaard!!” *Now then, how do I get around this irate dude?* “How dare you interrupt a divine duel?! You’d better be ready to pay an arm for that at least!”

The beastman brandished his weapon—a wide bastard sword. He had everything over me. Unless I’d judged incorrectly, he had more brute strength than Arvin and skills on par with Shuna’s. How was I supposed to take on a guy like that?

But first, I had something to say to these punks.

“Like I give a rat’s ass, you goddamn imbeciles! We’ve got another expedition tomorrow! Full schedule and everything! *You* stay the hell outta *my* way! If you’re that thirsty for blood, go watch some pigs duke it out for all I care!”

“.....Quite the bark you got there. Let’s see if your bite lives up to it.” He strode toward me. I nocked a normal arrow.

Guess I’ll do what I can.

I loosed the arrow at the beastman without even looking at him. He caught my ammunition with his bare hand, then tossed it away. Staring right at his forehead this time, I unleashed several arrows in a row. He saw through my feint, and my shots drove into the wall.

Next up—

I nocked two arrows and fired them so they sandwiched him. That didn’t bother him in the slightest; he kept walking. Both shots missed him by a hairbreadth. Superbly minimalistic dodging, but—

“Ruh?”

—his belt snapped off and his pants fell, weighed down by the steel sheath that hung from them. They got caught up around his knees, making it difficult for him to walk. Embarrassed in front of all his fellow disciples, the beastman immediately crouched to retrieve his drawers—and in doing so, gave me an opening to close the space between us.

I rammed my knee into his face with all my strength, feeling his nose crunch beneath it. Blood splattered grotesquely over his face, and he flew into a light panic, doubtless since some of the blood had traveled down his throat and made him choke. Impressively, he still did not release his sword.

Calmly, I slipped behind him and whipped out my garotte, a simple tool constructed from a fiber rope with a handle on each end for easier gripping—a strangulation weapon. I roped it around his neck and pulled him up on my back. My merciless arm strength and the beastman’s own weight immediately tightened the twine against him. After getting roped into (and losing) several brawls here, I’d learned from my defeats and settled on this method. Knocking their brains around in their heads or strangling them were two surefire ways to

take down even the bulkiest of opponents. Not even the ryvius could help them then.

After seeing his blade fall, I waited about six more seconds to completely knock him out. I unwrapped the garotte from his neck and lay him on the ground. Bubbles foamed at his mouth. He was a man of this world—he'd bounce back soon enough.

“.....”

Without so much as a word, a new devotee stepped up to meet me. He was a reptilian beastman: His eyes slanted narrowly to the sides, and scales crept over his cheeks and neck. A tail thicker than his thighs snaked out behind him. You never could tell by appearances here, but he looked around twelve, thirteen. Androgynous and on the smaller side, he had fiery red hair.

“So you're up next?”

“.....” *Say something, man. Don't make this awkward.*

Murderous stares shot my way from every direction. Now it was too late to regret or back down. I'd take out as many as I could and go down with them.

“Ahh, give it up, give it up, lads,” a voice rang out, and I felt a shaggy hand laid on my head. “There's no valor to be gained fighting this pitiful, frail little chap. If anything, you'll only lose it by attempting to fight him.”

“Ah, Lord Baafre.”

There stood an enormous wolfman. In modern-day terms, he was what you'd call a true beastman. Everyone else was more like a half beast. A lycan, he'd protected the Right Continent from the deadly threat of vampires. He was the last living Endguard and the original owner of my bow.

“Now, Souya. I just popped by to mooch some cash from Gladwein to help fill my howling belly, but what in the dark moon is all this fuss?”

“Umm, it's too much of a pain to fill you in. Do I have to? We'll make a run for it, so please hold them off for a few minutes. I'll owe you drinks.”

“Of course, be my guest.” He generously agreed to help just as the beastman I'd strangled started to come to.

I piled Arvin and Shuna on my back, then lifted them up. *Damn, they're heavy. So goddamn heavy.*

Just as I was about to scurry away—

“What is the meaning of all this commotion?” asked a woman’s booming voice, ringing out loud and clear. My eyes were drawn to her billowing blond hair, her healthy bronze skin, the gorgeous muscles rippling over every inch of her body, her voluptuous bosom—and the bikini armor she wore. This was Gladwein, a recently deified goddess who’d earned her divinity from the tale of her slaying the Wicked Dragon.

“Master Baafre, is this your doing?” she asked him.

“Hardly, I just arrived.”

“Someone explain.” Murmurs buzzed through the crowd of her followers.

The beastman I’d taken down approached her, shaking his head back and forth. “I-I’m terribly sorry, milady. I was only attempting to do away with this man who intruded upon a duel, but—”

“Gainz, did you lose to him?”

“No, I merely let down my guard for a second, but I swear I—” He started to say something like *didn’t lose on my own strength*.

There was Lady Gladwein’s fist, raised toward the heavens. And there was the beastman, flying through said heavens. Those were the only two things my eyes managed to register.

“Even the strongest among us face defeat. However, does loss make one weak? No. The truly strong use their failures to catapult themselves ever higher. Only the feeble cannot own their shortcomings.”

The beastman’s flight came to an end as he crashed into the ground with a fleshy *splat*.

“Gainz, I ask you once more. Are you weak? Or are you my strong disciple?”

“I.....I’m so very s-sorry, milady.” His ryvius had been totally drained, so his face looked a nasty mess. Still, he clung to consciousness and apologized to his beloved goddess.

“I am not the one in need of an apology, am I?”

“You, insidious four-eyes. That was a brilliant show of—” Aaand he completely ran out of gas. *He’s not dead, is he?*

“Now then, Otherworlder. I believe the last time we met, you came with Evetta, did you not?”

“You remember me?”

Lady Gladwein stepped closer. I felt the most overwhelming aura from this totally natural movement. She was on a completely different level.

“My disciple has behaved rudely to you. Please forgive him.”

“Of course. It’s no trouble. If you’ll excuse me, I really should get going.” I just wanted to get out of there.

“Nevertheless, the fact that you’ve defiled the sanctity of a duel remains. For that, you shall receive a fitting punishment.”

“Huh?” *That can’t be fair. Who knows how badly they would’ve messed up our plans if I’d let those two meatheads keep beating each other to a pulp?*

“We have our own sense of pride, however foolish it may seem. Many have protected and passed these values down for generations. Some have risked their lives, and others have lost them in that effort. This rule must be shown proper respect. An outsider with naught but shallow roots here has no right to change that. Otherworlder, this is our tradition.”

“.....” *Tradition, huh? That’s one of the hardest things for a Japanese person to argue against.* “In any case, please tell me what you’d like me to do.” For some reason, I found myself hiding behind Lord Baafre—hopefully, this Endguard would ultimately protect me.

“By all rights, I should demand you atone for this in blood. However, you showed great skill in defeating Gainz, regardless of what foxy schemes you employed. You’ve proven your mettle. Hmm, let me see... As a compromise, how about you pay for this transgression with a meal?”

“Huh?” *Wait, with food?*

“Otherworlder, I have heard tell you cured the king of his ailments with a

delicacy called 'rahmen.' My followers apply themselves to intense, grueling training every day. We take care to keep them in good health, yet some fall ill even so. I shall have you ease my devotees' pains with this 'rahmen' of yours."

Ramen's not a cure-all, you know?! But whatever.

"All...right." We should have enough packs of ramen for that. At least, just barely enough to cover everyone.

"Also..."

"?"

Lady Gladwein continued. "It appears you took the elven princess as your wife. I hereby invite her to the meal. Bring her with you."

"As a hostage? In that case, may I interest you in Lord Baafre as a—"

"Oi." This guy would probably never die, no matter how much you killed him.

"Do not think me so loathsome. I merely wish to look upon her face. I had heard she was in town, but fate has not yet brought us together. This is a perfect opportunity."

But why Lana? I wanted to ask but thought it best to refrain for the moment. In fact, I already had a pretty good idea.

"Understood. Give me a little time, if you would."

"I'm starving. Hurry it up."

I ignored Lord Baafre, said my good-byes, and left Lady Gladwein's quarters. Before I could get started on the feast, I had somewhere I needed to take these two idiots.



"Anyway, Machina, that's the story. Get all the packages of instant ramen we have out for me. Éa won't like it, but I'll cheer her up later."

"Roger. We have one hundred fifty left in total. Will this suffice?"

"From the rough head count I took, there seemed to be about twenty disciples in all..... I hope it's enough."

“We can use toppings to add volume. I’ll get a few options together. Machina over and out.”

Now then, it was probably about time for them to wake up.

“Squad Member Souya, I do not approve of this strategy,” Isolla chastised me as she hung from my waist.

“Disapproval overruled. Our expedition depends on this.”

“Are you sure you’re not only using that as an excuse to have others help you carry your guilt?”

“That’s not what this is. I have to do this. Our expedition depends on it.”

“Sorry, but do you intend to explain everything away with that one phrase?”

“Exactly. I’m willing to overlook a certain level of nastiness as long as it’s vital to our work.”

“How indecent.” She was getting on my nerves, so I muted her. “?!?!”

Her little arms banged against me. That got old quick, so I wound the garotte around her and stuffed her in my backpack.

“Ugh.” Shuna came to first. “What the—?”

As soon as he registered his alarm, Arvin woke up, too. “*Ngh...* Where are we?”

“Morning, boys.” They both recoiled a bit at my menacing demeanor.

“What the hell, Souya?” I ignored Shuna’s protests. It was only fair—they’d ignored all of mine.

“Could you tell us what this is all about?” Arvin asked. He tried to look calm, but the beads of sweat on his brow gave him away.

I’d had no other choice but to put them in this position. They lay next to each other on a bed, hands tied behind their backs, one ankle each chained to a corner of the bed. Yeah, I could see why they’d freak out.

“You know, friends, I’m very sad right now.”

“Hell if I care. Let me go.”

Ignored. “We finally came together, officially united, and just as I was planning to lead us into another expedition, you both decide to bash each other up until your ryviuses run dry. If I left you like that, we’d have to cancel our plans tomorrow. Same goes for the day after that, depending on your condition.”

“Aye, Souya. I admit I could’ve acted more maturely. But now that I’ve stepped down as leader, we can work out exactly where Shuna and I stand in our party so that going forward—”

“Shut the hell up.” I glowered Arvin into silence. “Sometimes you do just have to duke things out. Friendships can certainly blossom that way. But you need to know when to call it.”

“Well, yeah, but that’s not how Gladwein’s pride—”

“Then you should’ve told us to watch out for that from the beginning, dumbass! We only got into this mess because you—completely forgetting you didn’t have a sword—decided to pick a fight with some random stranger, remember?!”

“Huh? No, but.....yeah.” Shuna conceded the tiniest bit of guilt.

“Souya, don’t go so hard on him. I also—”

I stopped Arvin right there. “Don’t try to act like you’re above all this. Deep down, you’re exactly like Shuna—just a goddamn child who wants to stand at the top of the class by proving he’s the best. And what’s worse, you still pretend like you’re more mature than that.”

“*Gah!*” He seemed wounded; guess I’d hit the nail on the head.

“*Pfft*, he called you out,” snickered the boy.

“Shuna, you’re *literally* just a child.”

“Wha—?!” That also hit him where it hurt.

“Come onnn, guys. Getting upset when someone calls you childish is the best way to prove them right. Grow the hell up. I don’t give a shit if you risk your life to protect your pride, or fight, or get passionate about something other than dungeon diving. But you need to know where to draw the line. You’re

adventurers, aren't you? What's the point in doing something that's going to get in the way of your profession? It messes up my plans, see? Do you know how goddamn annoying it is to readjust them?!" I ranted, kicking the bed over and over again.

"F-forgive me, Souya. I'll be more careful."

"...My bad."

Such were their apologies.

"You're just saying that to get out of this, aren't you?"

"" ""

Watching them in that moment, I felt as if I were staring at my usual self in the mirror. I could read their minds like an open book.

"Well, whatever. Shuna, one question. How many followers does Lady Gladwein have in total?"

"Huh? Twenty-three. Why?"

"Souya, may I ask a question as well?"

"Go ahead, Master Arvin."

"Where are we?"

"This—"

Just then we heard a knock. A word from me and the door to the room opened. "This is the Goddesses of Slumber and Fertility Parlor, a brothel catering specifically to adventurers."

"Souya, thank you so much for waiting, meow," Tutu greeted me as she led two other ladies into the room. "Allow me to introduce you all."

A drop-dead gorgeous heim with long black hair took a seat on the bed next to Arvin. Though clad in a thin garment that left much for the eyes to feast on, she was surprisingly elegant.

"This young lady is Dicarte's Black Pearl, Lady Andoula. She once served as a royal consort in the Right Continent, but thanks to sheer luck and some divine mischief, she now finds herself here. However, the Black Pearl shines with a

mysterious, entrancing luster wherever she may go.”

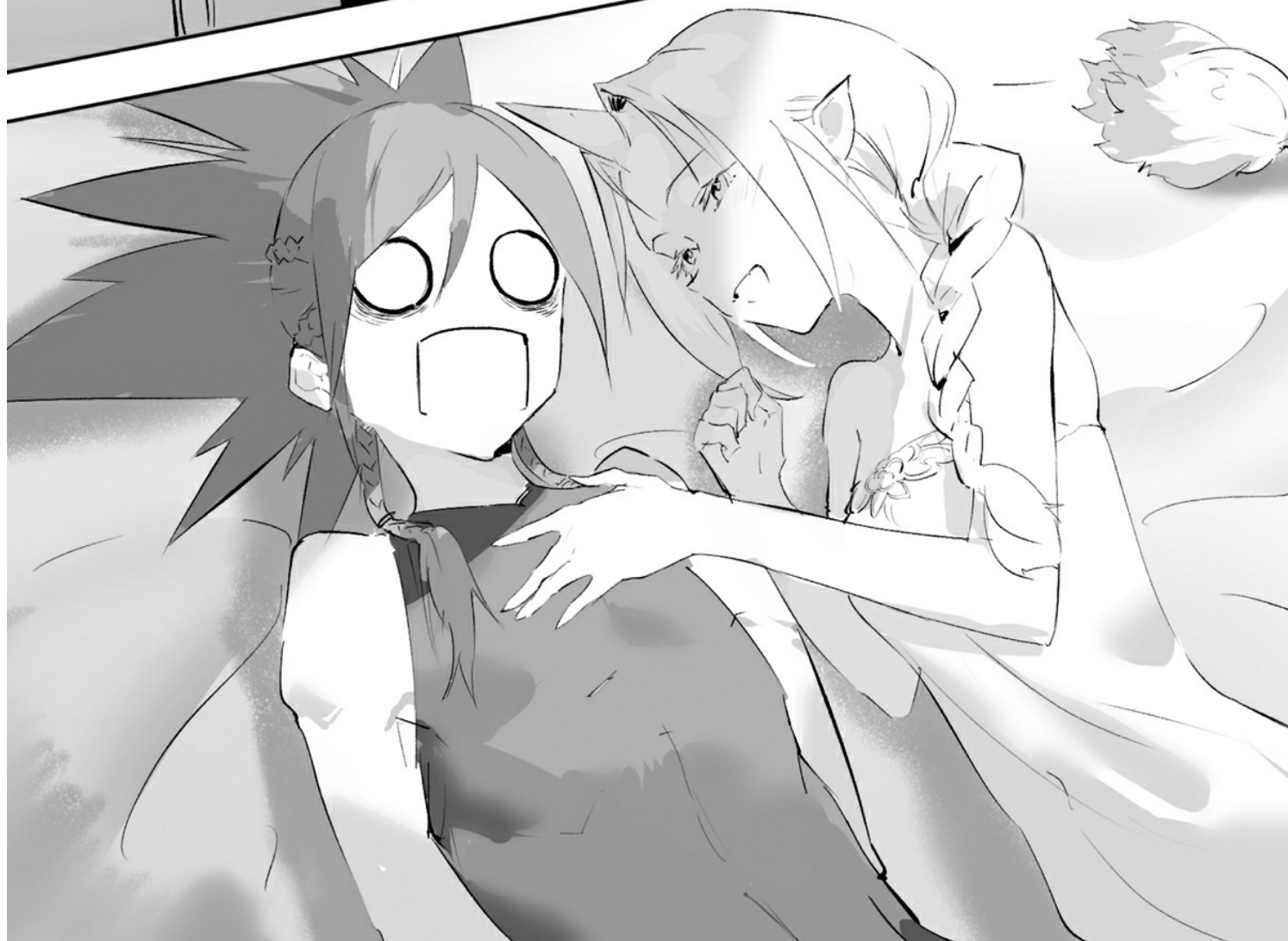
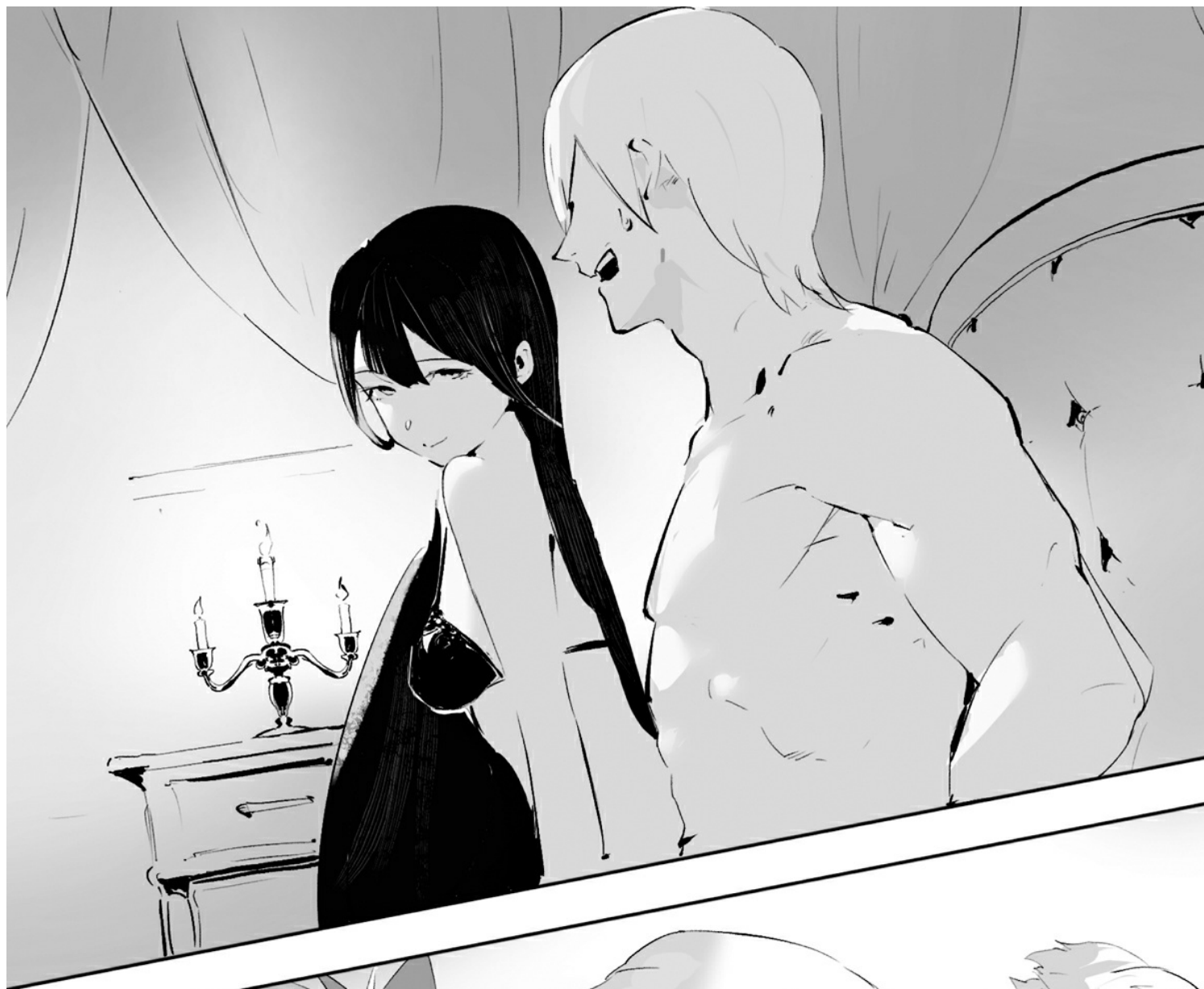
Up next, a silver-haired beastmaid lay down at Shuna’s side. A single horn protruded from her forehead and a fluffy ball capped her thin, long tail. While her countenance retained a youthful feel, the subtle smile on her lips belonged to a proper succubus.

“This is Lutharuru, the Silver Enchantress. She has not been here for long, but I guarantee her lust and service are genuine. I imagine even the toughest of adventurers will sing like angelic little boys under her hands.”

Then Tutu sauntered around behind me and slid her arms around my waist. *Thanks, but you don’t need to introduce yourself here.*

“Souya, is this what I—”

“Oh no, my lord knight. You must look only upon me.”



And just like that, Andoula claimed Arvin's lips. Watching a friend get down to it like this was more erotic than I'd thought.

"Souya! What the hell's wrong with you?!"

"Heh, hee-hee, how adorable, master swordsman. Just leave everything to me. I'll be gentle, and soon you'll be melting in my hands."

"Ah, hey! I mean, excuse me. Wait, sorry, seriously, n-not there—" *She's already won, Shuna. Let her show you how it's done.*

"Don't worry, boys, I'm not gonna tell Bel or Zenobia about this! Lovely ladies of Lowomen, I'm counting on you to refill their ryviuses and wring every last drop (of exhaustion) you can out of them. Just make sure they don't go too crazy and have to sit out tomorrow from back pain, please."

""Okaaay. ♪"" After hearing that rosy response, I retired from the room.

"Souya, you don't want to join them, meow?"

"Nah, that's not really my thing."

Tutu had followed me out. "*Mrah*, you're such a meanie. You told me to wait for you, so I've been keeping an eye out ever since last night, but you never came."

"When did I say that?"

"You were pretty drunk. Don't you remember?"

"Sorry, not at all." Blame it on the sleep deprivation and booze.

"Meow then, let's slink off into a room of our own."

"Tutu, do you mind if we get out of here?"

"Huh...?Okay, but just this once, meow. I'd only do this for you."

Taking Tutu to go, I left the parlor.



Once again at the entrance to Lady Gladwein's quarters, I met up with Lana and Éa.

“Here you go, Yaya. Everything you asked for.”

In a shockingly beyond-shocking twist, Éa pointed toward the wagon as if she wasn't bothered at all. A mound of instant ramen cups hid under the bulky, cloth-covered pallet, but she didn't even put up a fight. *Little sisters grow so fast.*

“Éa, Lana, I'm sorry to drag you out. Kind of a lot happened, and I agreed we'd all make and eat lunch here.”

“Darling, isn't this—?”

“A festering nest of Gladwein's disciples that's good for nothing but trouble.”

“Hmm? Then why would we eat here?” Lana asked, tilting her head in the most adorable way.

“It's all Shuna and Arvin's fault.”

“I don't quite understand, but it sounds like you've had a trying day.”

“Hello, Mrs. Souya,” Tutu greeted her from behind me.

“Nice to see you, Lady Lowomen disciple.”

“Today, I'm..... Um, Souya, what did you want meow for here?”

“To help me make lunch.”

“.....Seriously, I'm not doing this again. *Mrah.*”

“Sorry, I needed someone I could trust.”

“*Prrr*, what would you do without meow?” She perked up a little.

“Darling, I could've assisted you with the—”

“You were invited as a guest today, so we'll handle it this time, okay?!”

“.....Okay.” With time working against me, I was too afraid to risk a cooking accident.

Biting the bullet, I stepped once more into the residence. Eyes filled with blatant hatred for me and curiosity at the elven sisters fixed on us. Tutu clung fearfully to my poncho. Surprisingly, Lady Gladwein came to greet us herself.

“Welcome, Laualliuna. Ohhh, and if it isn't Éa, too.”

The two knelt before the goddess, and Lana addressed her with courteous refinement. “Lady Gladwein, we are truly honored to have received your invitation today. Allow me to express our deepest gratitude on behalf of myself, my husband, and my sister. May fertile prosperity visit your esteemed forces.”

“I have no need for such formalities. You were still suckling your mother’s bosom when first you and I met, after all. My, how you’ve grown—in more ways than one—since then.”

“Oh, we’ve met before?” my wife asked, her voice full of surprise. Éa and I were right there with her.

“Did Mellum not tell you? He was once my disciple. In terms of swordplay alone, he ranked among the top five of my most skilled devotees. Have you any skill with the blade? Some of his talent must flow through you.”

“I’ve been studying magecraft for so long that I haven’t had the opportunity.”

“Acquiring all manner of knowledge can only help you as an adventurer. Let us see what you can do. Come.” Lady Gladwein took her hand. “Éa, you as well. Show me how one trained in beastfolk archery shoots.”

“Y-yes, milady,” Éa stammered, crumbling under her pressure.

“I met you, too, as a babe. You were a fussy child, always wailing at the top of your lungs. I had to let you suckle on my own breast before you finally calmed down.”

“Whaaat?!”

The goddess led the two elven sisters away to the training grounds, smiling warmly as if she’d been reunited with long-lost family.

“I’ll take you to the kitchen, Sou. Uh, Tutu, what’re you doing here?”

“Souya dragged meow into helping.”

Bel popped out from around a corner and began to lead us.

“Before we get started, Sou, there’s one thing I need to tell you,” she warned along the way. “I’ve heard most of what happened, and you should know Gladwein’s followers are pretty picky foodies. They’ve got relatively discerning palates, though they hardly taste anything after an extra-long day of training.

But they've had lots of downtime today, so I'll bet they're gonna come down really hard on us. Actually, a bunch of them had planned to go defeat the dragonoise, so I can see them looking for something to complain about."

"Got it."

"And where are Shunie and S'Arvin?"

"They needed a break."

Bel looked back and forth between Tutu and me. "Ahh, okay. Got it." A truly perceptive young lass indeed.

We arrived at Gladwein's kitchen, which beat the king's in size. I could probably roll around on the enormous counters. It was equipped with six large pots, a full assortment of the cooking utensils commonly used here, and countless sharp knives set against the wall. One of them looked like it could cleave straight through a whole tuna.

It was also stocked with a wide variety of ingredients: meats, vegetables, and dairy products; liquors and spices; nuts, grains, fruits, and dried seafood. It even had some seasonings I'd never seen for sale in the markets.

Is it just me, or do they eat better than the king? Is he just too frugal?

Well, time to get to it. All we had to do was boil the ramen, but I wanted Tutu's help since we had so many portions to make. I went to the wagon we'd parked out front and uncovered the pallet to take the ramen with..... There was no ramen.

"Yaya, Lady Gladwein's busy with Lana, so I can give you a hand over here. Haha!" The younger elf appeared out of thin air.

"Éa, where's the ramen?"

My Otherworldly little sister flashed me a dazzling smile. "You didn't really think I'd bring it, did you? It's mine."

"Wait, hold up. Then what're we supposed to give these starving beasts?"

"Easy. I mean if you think about it, ramen's just—"



The dining hall in the residence had seen better days but was a thoroughly clean and tidy space. It buzzed with chatter. Lady Gladwein sat at the head of a long table with Éa and Lana at either side, and Lord Baafre was an empty chair away from Lana. All the food had been laid out; I had nothing left to do but wait for them to dig in.

I felt a murderous hostility aimed toward me. Bel and Tutu took their seats, too. Looked like I was the last one standing. Lord Baafre waved me over, so I filled the seat next to him.

“Silence,” Lady Gladwein ordered, and quiet immediately filled the room. “Our lunch has come rather late today, but do forgive us. As for you, Souya, well done completing the sudden task I put before you. I imagine it cost you no small trouble. Though discord may have brought us together, let us now share this feast and drink in peace.”

Well, I guess I'll let it slide. I'm not so childish as to complain about every single thing.

“So Souya, we have before us what is called ramen, correct?”

“Yes, this is ramen.”

White noodles floated in the semitransparent amber broth filling our bowls. Bacon, a sunny-side-up egg, and sautéed mushrooms garnished every one. This, beyond a shadow of a doubt, was udon.

As Éa had put it, “Nobody here actually knows what ramen’s like, right? They’ll never find out if we give ’em udon and just call it ramen.”

She had a perfectly good point, but I still felt uneasy trying to put one over on a goddess. Lady Gladwein raised her goblet.

“Hark, one and all. This ramen gave our king renewed strength and saved him from the clutches of disease. Partake of this meal, replenish your spirits, and let it fuel your training tomorrow. Now eat.”

At her signal, every single disciple dug into their ramen (udon) at once.

“””” ””””

No one said a word. They silently brought forkfuls of the udon to their

mouths. I almost crapped my pants with fear. Nervously, I took a taste of Éa's custom creation. She'd made everything herself, from the soup to the noodles. Her dexterity and deftness had floored me.

"Mmm! It's so good!"

The fish broth base had only light soy sauce seasoning, but the fat and sodium from the bacon melted in and gave it just the right amount of saltiness. I had no complaints about the noodles; they had a nice chewy texture to them. You could easily sell these. My younger sister here had a knack for cooking. As for my younger sister back in the modern day—well, I won't go into that.

I punctured the egg yolk and twirled some of it up with my udon. "Ohhh."

A slice of butter hidden underneath was merging with the yolk, elevating the flavoring to something reminiscent of carbonara. What a blending of Eastern and Western traditions—a true *matrimonio*.

I devoured the thick bacon, inhaled all the noodles, drained the broth. I saved the mushrooms thoroughly steeped in all the soup's savors for last, chewing each one mindfully. And just like that, I'd completely cleaned my bowl.

Wait, is my sister a prodigy in the kitchen?

"Mr. Souya, these noodles appear very similar to the English variety of—" I cut Machina and her insensitive commentary off at the speed of sound.

"Bring meow your bowls if you'd like more," Tutu called out.

With a great scramble of chairs, almost all Gladwein's disciples stood from the table. Their empty bowls in hand, they formed an orderly line before Tutu, who dished out additional servings. They glanced over at me, somehow frustrated. Their reaction to me aside, it seemed the meal was a hit. More and more people joined the line for seconds.

"Mmm, sunny-side-up eggs and pork make everything sooo much better. ♪" Éa seemed supremely satisfied with her own handiwork. Enjoying the taste of your own meals and finding pleasure in them is a sign of real progress.

"But it needs a dash more spice," she said, then fished a bottle of deep, deep-red spices out of her glove.

“*Koff!*” The smell alone had Bel choking. “Huh? Éa, what the heck is that?”

“I’ve gotten really into making my own spice mixes recently. This is one of my newest creations. It’s got some demon pinkies, medicinal shoots you can forage in the Heuress Forest, roots of a tree spirit, nuts, mushrooms, and a bunch of other stuff. It’s super good.” Éa’s udon turned bright crimson. “Mm-mm-mm. ♪ This kick is *the best!*”

Sensing danger from the smell and color the spice had produced in the soup, Bel turned ghastly pale. I still believed Éa was a chef par excellence, but she was also a genius when it came to messing it all up with ungodly finishing touches. Fortunately, she’d only experimented on herself so far, so she hadn’t claimed any casualties—yet.

She and Lana are really similar in the strangest ways. I guess you can’t fight the DNA running through your veins. Speaking of blood—

“Oh-ho, this is quite the delicacy. I had no inkling Éa had such skill,” Lady Gladwein remarked, visibly impressed.

“Oh no, my husband taught her all she knows about cooking. Although I do admit she has a natural talent for it,” Lana replied, bragging about me. Her profile and Lady Gladwein’s had a strong, undeniable resemblance.

One of Lana and Éa’s ancestors, Heuress, could manipulate fog and had gained great renown as a master archer. A true hero, he’d slain the giant spider that had terrorized the entire Right Continent.

However, this story left out a crucial piece of the truth. Heuress could not claim all the credit for vanquishing the great spider. He’d relied on the skills of Lümidia of the Hidden Name, a rare breed of archer, to shoot the beast down. According to Machina’s research, her name did appear in a single compilation of adventurers’ tales from the Left Continent.

Lümidia was born to the revered Welswein military family and soon became its favorite child. From a young age, she made her own name through courageous acts, showing the world glimpses of sincere heroism. She set off on a journey and wandered away from the Left Continent, leaving anecdotes of her greatness everywhere she visited before arriving in the Right Continent. However, as soon as she set foot on this land, she disappeared from all

historical accounts.

Even though no record of her remains, I knew the truth. She'd fallen in love with an elf and had borne a child. Her offspring had gone on to rule over the elves as Heuress's legitimate heir, and the ensuing bloodline had continued until the present day. I also once saw Lady Gladwein's name written next to an account of the heroic archer's life. Lümidia, it turns out, was Lady Gladwein's daughter. In other words—she was a heim.

Elves prided themselves on the purity of their pedigrees. If anyone ever discovered heim blood ran through the veins of the Heuress Clan, they would lose all political sway, and a civil war would break out to fill the vacant throne. I would take this secret to my grave.

Lady Gladwein most likely knew this truth as well. It had, in all likelihood, motivated her to leave the Left Continent, after which she'd earned her place among the Legion Gods as a hero and settled down in distant Remlia. The two of them eating side by side could have been mother and child. It felt lonely watching them so far off in their own world, one that was closed off to me.

“By the by, Souya. I've been waiting for a good moment to ask.”

“Huh?”

Lord Baafre addressed me in a somewhat serious tone, his words nearly lost in the clamor at the table. It would've come across as much more suave if he hadn't been licking his empty bowl while he spoke. “That bow, is it giving you any trouble?”

“No, not really. It's amazing. I'd have died ten times over by now without it.”

For just a split second, a sharp glint flashed in his eyes. “Then have you felt any abnormal changes in your body?”

“Abnormal changes?”

“That weapon is bewitched. One could not conceivably come away unscathed after drawing it as easily as you. It bears a curse fueled by the Endguards' wounded pride, seething enmity toward vampires, madness of the dark side of the moon—and festering obsession. The human psyche would break under the weight of any of those dark emotions.”

I got what he meant, but I felt perfectly healthy. “Sorry, but seriously, I’m totally fine.”

“I see. Perhaps you have your goddess to thank for protecting you.”

“Lady Mythlanica?”

“Mythlanica—I’m sure I’ve heard that name before, but I cannot recall it. Perhaps *a certain kind of hex* is at work there.”

What? No way—Lady Mythlanica, protecting me? That lazy goddess who’s done nothing more than take on the role of beloved pet? The one who sleeps an average of sixteen hours per day? Whose entire existence revolves around eating, sleeping, and loafing?

“In any case, if you’re hale and hearty, then all is well. However, the moment you think the bow may have affected you in any way, come straight to me. After all, you’re one of the Endguard. You must always strive to keep your vessel fit. Recently, a disturbing shadow has been stirring in the North. Those Lillidean dogs have set out against it, though I doubt they’ll be any help. If anything, they’re only sending that darkness easy nourishment. Our call to arms may not be long now. Do not forget to sharpen your skills daily.”

“.....Huh?” *What the hell did he just say?* “Lord Baafre, who, what now?”

“You and I, the final Endguards. A sorry lot we are, too. Not much to look at.”

“How does that work?” Who’d decided that, and when? Was it that time I blacked out?

“Come now, you can wield a lycan weapon, therefore you’re an Endguard. That’s about all that’s left of us now. Be my company.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Too bad, I won’t accept that. I’ll drag you with me if I have to.”

Noooooooo! How do all these problems that have nothing to do with adventuring keep popping up around me? I can already tell I’m gonna get roped into this mess later. Should I just throw the bow away and cut my losses? No, can’t do that. Even with it I’m no match against any but the weakest of monsters. If I switched over to a normal one, I’d be no more help than a lump of

coal in our sacks. I was stoked to get this unbelievable bow for eight gold pieces, but I never knew it would come with all these downsides.

“Lord Baafre, out of curiosity, what is it you’re planning to do in the North?”

“Hmm, exterminate vampires, I suppose? We’re still awaiting the return of Remlia’s reconnaissance team. Fear not, we shan’t depart in the next day or two. Nothing so sudden.”

“You do realize I’m just a normal, unremarkable adventurer, right? Please stop trying to drag me into something so incredibly important.”

“If you truly are what you say, then all the more reason for you to venture into forbidden territories, encounter undiscovered foes, and seek your glory. Makes your heart soar, doesn’t it?”

“No, not in the least.” *Why should I have to risk my life like that? It’s idiotic.*

“Are you quite sure you’re an adventurer?” he asked, hitting me right where it hurt.

In all honestly, giving me glory was like feeding pearls to a pig. I’d hock it all to anyone who wanted it. I’d come here to reach the fifty-sixth floor of the dungeon and acquire the resources there—that was all.

Or at least, that was all it was supposed to be, but now, I felt the tiniest pull to try something else—

CHAPTER 4

Thorny as a Thistle

[53RD DAY]

Life got busy after I once again officially took over as party head. After Arvin and Shuna's brawl, and that whole mess with Gladwein's disciples, I still had to handle paperwork at the Guild and sell off the dragonoise materials, not to mention pay off all the debts Arvin's band had incurred. While I was at it, I took down two corrupt merchant organizations, got one of them incorporated into the Zavah Night Owl Trade Group, and, as reward for my success in this matter, ended up having Lady Glavius, the Night Owl, the other goddess I'd consecrated a covenant with, officially bestow her "Wise Eyes" upon me.

Though it only happened on occasion, when dealing with a trade group or on an expedition, I'd sometimes found that I could discern the true nature of something. I'd mistakenly assumed it was some innate skill. Never would I have guessed that this goddess imparted her grace to her disciples. This new skill would help me accurately assess things like resources, along with the monsters and people I encountered—a handy tool for our dives. However, Lady Glavius did leave me with one word of caution.

"The true value of an item is constantly in flux. You may accurately appraise a precious stone as augite in one moment, only to find it is but a pebble in the next. Additionally, not even divine eyes can discern the worth behind everything in existence. That is for humans to judge. Take care you see things for what they truly are and distinguish the precious from what is without import in this foggy world of men."

An apt warning from the Goddess of Commerce, and one I took to heart. Still, I was an adventurer, not a merchant. I needed to make sure I never forgot that. No matter how you sliced it, I spent way too much time on things outside of my true profession.

And then, once again, I came face-to-face with another problem that seemed poised to steal even more time. The issue—the green-eyed monster.

Nasty rumors about me circulated among adventurers courtesy of the corrupt trade group I'd put out of business. They accused me of committing marriage fraud, of being an impostor, of swindling the monarchy, and of paying to advance my career. The biggest offenders were the initiates and adepts who'd hit a wall in their expeditions, along with initiates who'd started out at the same time as I had. They spread truths, half truths, and flat-out lies about me all over town.

Generally, people in Japan say rumors fade in seventy-five days. Luckily, the bad rep fell squarely on my shoulders, and for some reason (maybe pity?) only positive stories about my party members made the rounds. Restaurants would often give them snacks and drinks on the house; I, on the other hand, had gotten raw ingredients served to me on at least five occasions. Two of those times, the meat on the menu—still very much alive—had attacked me. It pissed me off, but in the end, I was an adventurer. I'd prove any rumor wrong with my success.

Or at least that was how I saw it, but Shuna and Lana took to pummeling every last one of the folks they heard talking shit about me. Shuna I could handle. As long as Arvin was with me, we could step in and make peace. After that, all we had to do was give him something tasty to munch on and he'd be back to his perky self in no time. A round of drinks for the group the boy had tried to pick a fight with would clear up any misunderstandings. Everybody left happy.

But with Lana...shit got rough. Really rough. Seriously. It made me happy she got angry on my behalf, but she was the last person I'd want to go off on. When she cast a spell to send someone flying, she usually wound up sending *the whole shop* with them. And she caused no shortage of injury to the local residents.

What with the medical fees, reconstruction costs, reparations for nuisances, and hush money we had to dish out, each one of these scuffles sent on average about seventy gold coins down the drain. We'd blown through all the cash the Zavah Night Owl Trade Group had given me. Worst-case scenario, I could see

myself having to draw from our expedition funds to cover the costs. Apparently, the next time she destroyed the boss's bar, we'd be banned for life.

"You're an incredible mage. Can't you cast your spells with a little more finesse?" I'd tried asking her, but apparently, no matter what type of magecraft she used, the incantation's intensity would always blow way beyond normal proportions. She and Zenobia conjured the same spell to test by just how much, and Lana's came out approximately thirty times stronger. Not only that, it cost her wildly less mana than it did Zenobia. In the end, it worked out to be more efficient to cast tremendously powerful spells that took a heavy toll on MP reserves.

Is she, like, some goddess of destruction's pet project?

Regardless, we decided every one of us in the party would jump up to stop her whenever she started chanting. I couldn't let more hate be directed to her, the elven race, or the Heuress Clan, even though they'd disowned her. So I spread my own rumor to compensate.

"Any adventurer who messes with the Otherworlder will be stricken with ill fortune."

Adventuring required you to constantly risk your life. You could have the perfect combination of talent, preparation, quick wit, and wisdom, and a dash of bad luck could still send you to the grave. Naturally, my ilk got very touchy around anything having to do with jinxes. To really fill the rumor out, I engineered two or three actual mini calamities. I'd set up every hit to take place on the main road, at the time of day with the heaviest traffic.

With the first party, I made all their belts corrode and snap off in public, leaving them butt naked from the waist down. The second party was almost squashed by a berserk, unmanned carriage. As for the other parties, the number of coins I made fall from their purses was equivalent to how many slanderous comments they'd spoken about the Otherworlder. Seeing all these adventurers wailing about their misfortunes in the heart of the city cemented the reality of the "Otherworlder's Curse" for everyone else.

Two days after all this, not a single bar buzzed with rumors about me. In fact, adventurers took it upon themselves to silence all who let a thoughtless

comment slip with a fist to the face as if to say, *Don't get us involved in that shit*. My name morphed completely into a cursed word; it wasn't ideal, but, well, at least I'd managed to divert the hate directed at Lana.

Plus, they say rumors only last seventy-five days. Not one day passed in this town without some kind of commotion. I was sure this would blow over and fade into the wind soon enough.

With all this, a whole week passed before we got back down in the dungeon.

Currently, we found ourselves on the thirteenth floor. Pops's map had made it easy to traverse the levels up to this point. Since we now traveled as a seven-person band, I'd slightly adjusted our battle formation accordingly. Corridors in the dungeon ran an average of four meters wide, meaning we could only walk two or three abreast and still have enough room to move freely. We also had to think about the people behind us and leave some space between the rows. That meant we couldn't go marching single-file like in a certain national-treasure-level JRPG.

Just like before, I split the group into two different subdivisions. Arvin, Shuna, and Isolla and I formed the lead group. Bel, Éa, Zenobia, and Lana took the rear. My job was to detect and "fish for" approaching enemies. Using Isolla's varied sensors and the Wise Eyes, I'd evaluate our foes and shoot an arrow at them before they could strike. If that took them down, great, but if not, I'd act as bait and lead them to their deaths by way of Arvin and Shuna. If we encountered a large group of monsters, I'd steer them away somewhere else to buy time.

I decided to leave the actual slaying to Arvin and Shuna as much as possible. I couldn't have found any nits to pick with either of their battle skills if I'd tried. They were powerful. In the right conditions they could probably hold their own against adepts. All we had to do was make sure they could respond at a moment's notice.

Bel played shortstop. She had a well-balanced mix of offensive and defensive skills, so I gave her flexibility to move back and forth in battle as needed. The combined spells she and Lana could conjure together added a large-scale attack to our toolbox, but I forbade them from using these very risky incantations since they could easily slip out of control.

Éa watched out for anything approaching from the rear and gave us covering fire during battles. An assault straight to our backs could wipe out our entire party. Since she had stronger enemy perception than anyone else in our group, I asked her to focus it all on the area behind us. But you couldn't sneeze at her backup onslaughts, either. Arrows shot from her capable fingers easily pierced the eyes or hearts of any of the minor-league monsters crawling around.

Zenobia focused exclusively on providing backup and protecting the latter half of the party. She was also our pinch hitter. Frankly, the flamecraft she conjured wasn't much to write home about, but she did cast formidable defensive spells. And in case any enemies did slip past Éa, Zenobia could step up and stop them in their tracks.

Lana was our trump card. In terms of the potential to inflict instantaneous damage, she ranked among the best in Remlia. Unfortunately, it wasn't all good news. Her incantations delivered far more devastation than we usually required over an extensive area. One of the biggest issues involved her MP recovery. I'd thought sweets or ice cream would solve all our problems, but they were no panacea. They could only restore a limited amount of mana.

While testing new dessert recipes and evaluating their potential to replenish magic, I'd asked Lana to bust out all the spells she had. By the second day, nothing she ate could get her magic reserves to budge. A full day later, however, the desserts replenished her MP once again, and I breathed a huge sigh of relief. We would need a lot more time to verify exactly how this worked. Machina had already started analyzing the exact figures.

Since uncertainty still dogged this mana-refueling strategy, I decided it wouldn't hurt to conserve Lana's. Even so, just having a secret weapon at all felt very reassuring. Plus, we'd also established another means of replenishing our ryviuses. Taking that into consideration, the other guys and I felt comfortable pushing ourselves a bit past what might be wise.

For now, at least, we were going with this formation.

Keeping my breaths shallow and quiet, I concealed my presence and peered into the black void. I'd extinguished my lantern. Using my night vision to guide me, I quietly, so very quietly, stole through the dark alone.

“Enemy detected at two o’clock.”

“Copy.”

At Isolla’s warning, I focused in that direction. An enormous snake lazily approached from farther up the lightless corridor, gracefully slithering through the air. How it flew was a mystery to me; though it did have small wings, they hardly looked strong enough to keep it aloft. And though I called it “enormous,” at about thirty centimeters wide and six meters long, it looked downright adorable compared to the massive dragonoise. About fifteen meters stood between it and me.

“Enemy reaction registered. It’s noticed your presence.”

Clenching an arrow between my teeth, I nocked another on my bow. With a quiet *swoosh*, the creature barreled toward me. *How did it spot me in this pitch black?* I wondered, then immediately abandoned the question.

“Turn on the light.”

“Roger,” Isolla responded before turning herself on to shine as brightly as a lantern.

I drew my bow taut; tension built in the arrow. I thought of nothing but killing my foe, just like the snake. With my hand on my bowstring, I could detach myself from anything and everything. I’d shoot down god or demon without hesitation.

Wait for it—

“Ten meters and approaching. Eight, six, four.” The monster opened its gaping mouth to swallow me whole.

—*Now.*

My bowstring sang as my shot sprang from it. The arrow, soaring as lithely as a snake itself, shot straight through the top of the beast’s mouth before burying itself in its brain. The giant creature collapsed on the floor, then flopped and twitched like a fish. Less blood wept from the wound than I’d expected.

I nocked another arrow, observing with cold impassivity. Somehow—this wasn’t over yet.

Turned out, the giant snake's body went on for far longer than I'd originally thought. Around half of it still stretched into the dark corridor whose outline I could only barely make out. Then I saw its tail—rearing its head at me. Shadows raced toward me, but I wouldn't waste my aim on them. No point firing at something you're not sure you can hit.

I drove another arrow into the great snake's body, pinning it to the stony ground, then leaped back with all my might. The monster's teeth snapped an inch away from my face, but its jaws clamped down on nothing but air.

"Attack successfully evaded."

This damn thing had two heads. Now under no pressure at all, I sank one more shot into this second cranium. But even after all that, it still refused to die.

"Activate pulse scanner. Mark this stubborn asshole's heart with a red dot."

"Copy that, activating pulse scanner." I heard a faint, high-pitched tone, similar to a ringing in the ears. "Scan complete."

Red marks appeared on my glasses, pinpointing the location of the beast's heart. In went another arrow. Although it convulsed for a bit, the snake was definitely dead this time.

Plenty of dungeon monsters could survive getting their skulls caved in. Some didn't even have heads to begin with. So far, though, all the life-forms I'd seen would perish as soon as you stopped their hearts.

I secured the perimeter.

"No foes detected."

"Copy." Slinging my bow over my shoulder, I unhooked my woodsman's ax.

"Souya, check its fangs, please."

"You got it." I stuck my tool between the creature's lips and pried its mouth open, careful not to touch anything with my bare hands. It was too risky.

"There's a groove in its fangs," Isolla noted.

"So they're venomous?"

"Yes. I'm going to take a sample. Please move me closer to the body."

I unhooked the AI from my waist and brought her up to the carcass. Two little arms stretched out from the mini kettle. One held a case of several test tubes while the other milked drops of venom from the bases of the snake's fangs. After that, she took tissue and blood samples as well.

"Extraction complete. Out of an abundance of caution, I'll create enough antibodies to this poison for everyone in the party as well."

"Please and thanks."

"Much like a common snake, this monster has a pit organ which functions as an infrared sensor. We must be wary of this going forward."

"All right."

I gazed offhandedly at the carcass for a while. Relatively thick meat hung from its bones. Reptiles were supposed to taste kind of like chicken.

"Squad Member Souya, let me give you a word of warning in advance: The majority of monsters are inedible. Out of the twenty-three specimens I've sampled from the creatures you've defeated, nineteen of them contain poison harmful to humans. The larger the beast, the more potent their toxins have tended to be, which leads me to suspect that, similar to ciguatera fish poisoning, the venom may increase in concentration as larger monsters devour those further down the food chain..... It kills, you know?"

"That's too bad. So is this guy good to eat?"

"I won't know for sure until I resurface and analyze these samples in the main pot."

"I see. Too bad." *Maybe we could get a dungeon-to-table thing going—use locally sourced meats, prepare them in the dungeon, and sell..... No can do. That's far too risky in far too many ways.*

"I'm heading back to the rest of the party. Let Éa know, would you?"

"On it." I'd given Éa and Arvin transmitters that allowed us to keep in touch up to two levels apart.

After retrieving my ammunition, I dragged the snake carcass over to a corner of the corridor, doused it in flammable oil, and set fire to it. Dungeon etiquette

required us to clean up remains for the next adventurers. Although fire did attract some monsters, nothing drew them more than blood.

With the disposal complete, I evacuated the area. “Isolla, turn off the light.”

The dim light disappeared. Quiet darkness enveloped me once more as the serpentine bonfire blazed in the background.

“*Haaah...*,” Isolla sighed, intentionally loud enough for me to hear. Actually, she didn’t breathe at all, so she was basically just making her own special effects. “*.....Haaah.*”

Oh, I get it—

“What’s wrong?”

—she’s trying to get my attention, right?

“Oh, nothing. It’s just, perhaps since I’ve grown so used to accompanying Sir Arvin, I don’t get the same thrill with you.”

I couldn’t have been more off the mark. “Am I that bad?”

“On the contrary, you’ve achieved tens of times more accomplishments than I’d estimated on my first evaluation.”

“Oh, thanks.” Was she complimenting me? It felt kinda nice.

“But you could get by without me, couldn’t you?”

“I wouldn’t say that.” I was pretty sure I couldn’t. Probably. At the same time, I did make sure to keep the worst-case possibility in mind at all times. For me, that meant losing someone or something. I tried to prepare for that, and do what I needed to avoid it, every day.

“Sir Arvin is a complete mess without me. He may look put together, but he needs someone tightly holding the reins for him. Heh-heh.”

Per her request, I let her stay with Arvin outside of expeditions. It looked like that might come back to bite me in the butt at some point, though.

“Just don’t get so attached that you lose sight of your job here.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I am constantly running simulations beginning with standard battles, party reorganization contingency plans in the event we lose

anyone, and warfare tactics. Additionally, I consider the implications of Sir Arvin taking over as leader, or of Sir Arvin becoming a hero, or of Sir Arvin and I—

“I get the picture.” This damn pot was starting to look a lot like a boy-crazy fanatic who just couldn’t keep her hands off the men in her life. “Call your beloved Arvin for me. I’ve got eyes on them. Tell him to stand down. I’m coming in.”

“Yes, sir.”

A pale light came into view at a four-way intersection. I glimpsed Arvin, his shield at the ready. This hunk captured the hearts of all the women around him, from the young lass at his lodgings to the waitresses at the bar, the trade group’s widow, adventurers running the gamut from initiate to elites, and—the real kicker—an AI from another dimension.

In addition to the impeccable and multifaceted combat career he’d had, he could get the entire party to stop arguing and ease up by shooting a single smile at us. Handsome and tall, talented, deeply responsible, and loyal to his friends, he held no prejudices against any race, hated vegetables, and couldn’t hold his liquor, and every now and then, a dark shadow would cloud his countenance with gloom. What I’m saying is, if I were a girl, I’d totally be into him.

He was the kind of person you wanted as a hero, the kind you wanted to help make it there. No one could ever convince me that murderous son of a bitch Werner was fit for the role. The Legion Gods could call him what they wanted, but he would never be a hero to me.

“Heyo,” I casually called out.

“Excellent patrol work, soldier,” he answered earnestly.

“Welcome back, darling. Are you injured anywhere?”

“Nope. I did run into a snake at one point, but I took it down without getting a scratch on me,” I reassured Lana, who was prone to anxiety.

“Aw man, you shoulda called me. I wanna try this baby out,” Shuna griped, slashing his new sword around in the air. At fifty gold coins, it was a relatively famous blade, though expensive for a placeholder. Machina was fighting the good fight and trying to determine if there was any way she could repair the

sword Shuna had inherited from his master. Her analysis had revealed it had an unusual structure, something called a Widmanstätten pattern, which basically meant meteorite and meteoric iron had been mixed together with its steel. How this method had been applied to produce such a strong and durable blade would take time to parse, even with all the tools of modern-day scientific analysis.

“Sir Arvin, please spread out the map. I will highlight the point beyond which we have not searched.”

“Aye.”

He unfurled his handwritten map, and Isolla projected the details over it. I used some charcoal to mark the spot where we’d turned back with an X.

“Lady Éa, if you would also be so kind.”

“Okaaay.”

She rolled her map out as well, and I added the same mark. I’d left one handwritten map each with Éa and Arvin in case both Isolla and I perished at the same time.

Touching my finger to Arvin’s map, I said, “Starting from the north, we went around clockwise inspecting the area.” The intersection where we’d gathered stood at the center of the dungeon floor. We were combing through the level from this axis in a circular pattern, but not to find the stairs leading down to the next floor. “All that’s left is the northwest quarter. If we can’t find any traces there—”

“I’ll call it. I’m this party’s shield. That’s the most important thing to me now.”

“Sorry. Thanks.”

“No, I should be the one apologizing for taking up so much of our precious time. We’ve done enough.”

We’d embarked on a mission to find Arvin’s friend, who had gone missing on this floor. I’d kept an eye on Werner and Luxgarre’s movements out of curiosity, but neither of them had made any attempt to search for Sanperié. That day we ran into them, they got into a nasty spat with some adventurers they’d hired

that turned violent. Ever since, they hadn't set foot in the dungeon. They spent their days drowning in booze and women, violence and sword training. Lucky bastards.

The chances Sanperié had survived were dismal. I held no hopes of finding him. At the very least, however, as a fellow friend of Arvin's and a leader of adventurers, I wanted to take back some proof that he'd lived. But Arvin had responded to the suggestion by saying, "Just give me one day to look for him." Anything more than that, he insisted, would hold the party back for too long, and he'd feel bad making everyone go out of their way for him.

At first, I'd wavered over what to do, but I understood where he was coming from. We'd search for only one day, but we'd use all the tools at our disposal. With Isolla's sensor, I figured we might discover some traces of Sanperié that other adventurers had missed.

"Okay, everyone stand by one more time. I'm going to check out the last—"

"Yaya, I'm hungry."

Soon after Éa—

"Oh, me too."

"Me! Me too! I'm hungry, too!"

—Shuna and Bel shot their hands up in the air.

"Actually, I'm a little peckish myself," Lana added sheepishly, raising her hand, too.

"Right, sorry. I'll get it going right away."

I'd gotten so focused on the search that I'd forgotten my empty stomach. I checked my watch—lunchtime had long since passed us by.

"It's fine, don't worry, I got this. You take a break, Yaya," Éa insisted, then unloaded her pack.

"Okay, thanks." *I guess watching your sister progress is also part of a brother's job, huh?* I thought, taking her up on her offer and sitting down. My knees and ankles ached a little, but I still had a lot of ground to cover. I needed to pay more attention to my pace.

“This is the perfect time for *you know what*,” Éa said mischievously. She’d taken out a bunch of instant ramen cups. It was certainly an easy option, but I felt a bit disappointed for some reason.

“What’s this?” Shuna asked Éa, his voice full of curiosity.

“Heh-heh-heh! *This* is real ramen.”

“‘Real ramen’? So then what was that stuff you gave Lady Gladwein?” asked Bel.

“Oh, that? Just some fake ramen I threw together.”

“Wh-what?!”

I mean, it was real in terms of udon. “I’ll give you a taste of the genuine article in a bit. You’d better be grateful.”

Bel’s eyes sparkled as she looked at the cups. “Éa, Éa, that fake stuff was suuuper tasty, but does that mean this is even better?”

“Naturally.”

“Eeek?!” Personally, I preferred the udon a thousand times over.

“And that’s not all,” my sister continued. “The taste isn’t the only amazing thing about the real deal.”

“Ooh? What is it, what?”

“C’mon, spit it out.” Bel and Shuna shuffled up to Éa.

“All you have to do to make it is add hot water and wait five minutes,” Éa sagaciously explained.

“‘Just hot water?!’” they both exclaimed in shock. Why did this feel like a commercial?

Éa took out a portable burner, filled it with extra emiluminite, and shook it. That was all it took to activate the mineral found in unlimited supply all over the dungeon and get it to produce intensely bright light, plus enough heat to boil water.

It was very convenient. Too convenient, honestly. Even when you considered it only worked in areas close to the dungeon, it was far too useful. The

prosperity of any civilization develops along with its access to sources of energy. With fuel as abundant as emiluminite, this dimension had the potential to thrive in much greater opulence. It felt odd. Was something getting in the way?

“This ramen is precious, enough to present as an offering to the king. But seeing as today’s our first day working together as a party, it’s a special celebration of its own. Think of it as my gift to us all.” Looking extremely pleased with herself, Éa put a pot on top of the burner, then filled it with water.

“This ramen, as you call it, looks very much to me like something Souya must have brought from his dimension,” Arvin remarked, raining on her parade.

“What’s Yaya’s is mine,” she said matter-of-factly. Arvin smiled back at her.

“In that case, Éa, does that mean what’s yours also belongs to Souya?”

“What’s mine is mine, obviously. Not like I’ve got much anyway, but I wouldn’t mind giving what I do have to him.”

“What do you have, then?”

“My body, I guess.”

““Kff?!”” Somehow, Bel and I both choked simultaneously. Shuna said nothing, but a faint redness bloomed on his cheeks. *This kid’s grown up enough to get it. But this is a joke, okay? Don’t take it that seriously.*

Curiously, Lana didn’t react at all. She did sneak over to sit at my side, though, and kept glancing over at me. This was a trying test of my skills as a man.

Did she make some more onigiri or something? Is she asking me for some sweets? Or maybe a hard drink? Wait, don’t tell me she’s gonna come out with a bold request here of all places?! That’s crazy, all that’ll come after we’re done here..... Hmm?

“Darling, I just thought of this now, but a river runs by the campsite, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.” What the what?

“After watching you work, I got the urge to brush off my fishing pole. Would you mind asking Lord Ghett if I may have his permission?”

“Uh, sure.” She couldn’t have uttered more of a non sequitur.

“Squad Member Souya, I’ve detected movement coming our way. It’s likely another group of adventurers,” Isolla announced.

“Got it.” We were taking a break right in the center of an intersection, the very definition of being in the way. “Shuna, Arvin, scooch back a bit,” I ordered, moving them to clear up some space.

Three adventurers approached: two warrior-type dudes carrying large shields, and a bigger woman. Together, they made an all-heim party of vanguards.

“Lunchtime, huh?” the imposing lady asked by way of greeting. In her midthirties, sporting a buzz cut, and lightly armored, she had muscles as tough as steel along with ritualistic tattoos and a few old scars marking her exposed skin. These were no mere ornamental decorations; they told a tale of a fierce warrior. We’d made way for them in the corridor, but they didn’t pass through.

“You guys want some?” Shuna offered, pointing at a cup of ramen Éa had hidden behind her back.

““?!”” Éa shot daggers at the boy, and my eyes flew open in astonishment.

“Shuna! You okay?! Does your stomach hurt?!”

“My stomach’s fine, dude.”

I tried to get closer, but he brushed me aside. Arvin put his hand to the kid’s forehead.

“Is it your head? Do you have a fever? Or maybe something’s wrong with his bones? Hmm, no fever. Then.....what is the meaning of this?!”

“It doesn’t mean anything!” he insisted in an unnaturally calm voice, pushing Arvin out of his face. “Good food just tastes better with more people, you know.”

The knight and I huddled together and shuffled back a few paces.

“What do you make of this, Master Arvin? It appears the young lad has grown.”

“Aye. It’s almost too shocking to believe, but it appears your unique teaching

methods have shown great results.”

“Speaking of, Master Arvin, how fares all with Lady Andoula?”

“Mm, well, I can’t complain.” He seemed neither too elated nor too boastful, just quietly confident. Th-this was it. A real man.

I better stop myself there. If I start judging by that standard, I’ll be the only boy left in the group.

“The three of you have been reeeal chummy lately. I smell a rat.” Zenobia considered us all suspiciously.

“““It’s nothing,””” the three of us replied in perfect unison. It only made us look even fishier.

And so went our slapstick routine until I heard someone snickering. I’d completely forgotten about them, but it was the lady, the leader of the other party, who was chuckling, derisively at that. I had no choice but to turn around.

“Ha! They said y’all were the up-and-coming party to watch, but is this all you got?”

“Say that again?” Though he’d stepped into adulthood, Shuna always pushed back first in this sort of confrontation.

“Y’all are straight-up sloppy. You’re sitting here, all happy, makin’ your little food, lettin’ it all hang out with zero sense of danger. Was it just plain luck you took out the dragonoise, like the rumors say? Or did you buy your ‘success’? I hear that Otherworlder right there’s got some ties to a nasty bunch of merchants.” I was the one who’d taken them out of the game, in fact, but telling her that wouldn’t make a difference.

“This slight I cannot ignore. Take that back.” Arvin stepped up to face her, too. They both turned all their focus on the woman, and I felt a pang of unease.

“Lemme give y’all a little lesson for here on out: Not all adventurers are your friends.” She whistled—some kind of signal.

“Emergency alert: enemy incoming.”

But Isolla’s warning came a beat too late. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a figure running. Then a young cat-eared beastmaid gripping a whip ran up from

behind the two vanguard men. Her weapon shot out like a snake and wrapped around Lana's staff. Before we could even say *Ah!* the staff and the beastmaid disappeared into the dungeon shadows.

"Oh?" the woman grunted, her voice breezy and her stance relaxed. Metal clashed against metal with a high-pitched clang—she'd blocked Shuna's downward strike with her sword.

"Arvin! You better stay out of this!" the boy growled, rushing in for another blow. My eyes could only catch the afterimage of his movements, but the woman parried his strikes effortlessly, as if it were child's play—one-handed.

"What do you want?" I demanded to know.

"To test you," she answered, not at all pressed by this additional conversation with me.

This lady's a beast. From all I've seen, she could be Lanceil-level strong.

Cautiously observing the other two, I stepped back. I ordered Bel and Zenobia to protect Lana. Éa I told to raise her guard; then I grabbed Arvin's shoulder and pulled him away from the engagement.

"You, mage, Miss Massive Melons, your magic is the real deal. I'll give you that. Not that it's worth shit if all you've got to protect you are these goddamn morons. They're not lookin' out in the darkness, and their blind spots are wide open. Your shield over here ain't even covering your weak spots. Get your shit together, vanguards, and get it in your head that your job is to die before those behind you, dumbasses."

Sparks flew from the innumerable clashes of their swords. Shuna's blade didn't have its usual bite. It didn't reach as far, move as fast, or have its usual heft. He hadn't gotten the hang of his new equipment yet.

"Shoulda mentioned this sooner, but if you want that staff back, you're gonna have to get through me first," the woman declared.

"Bet!" Shuna snarled, far too fired up. His moves were getting sloppy as he succumbed to both the indignation of having his skills derided and the panic of not meshing well with his weapon. He was going to lose.

“Let’s see if we can’t make this a li’l more interesting,” she mused. With a single strike, she put distance between herself and Shuna, thrust her blade in the ground, and unlatched the scabbard from her belt. “I ain’t gonna need more than this against you, runt.”

“Your funeral!” *This is bad. She’s got him totally provoked, playing by her rules.*

“Y’all head over to the rendezvous point. I’m gonna have myself a little fun here first,” she ordered, and her two flunkies set off. I loosed an arrow at one of them.

“So close,” the guy said as he effortlessly caught the shot, then tossed it aside.

“Isolla, did you get a tracer on him?” I whispered to her.

“Sí,” she whispered back. I’d coated that arrow with a tracing lacquer. Now we’d know exactly where these assholes regrouped.

The scabbard quashed all Shuna’s strikes. A wooden sheath, judging by the sound of it. Since it couldn’t possibly withstand a direct hit from a metal blade, the woman just kept swatting it against the flat of Shuna’s blade, redirecting the trajectory of his attacks. The difference in skill here could not be understated. Would one, or even two, of my vanguard’s clever tricks be enough to turn this around?

“Hmm?” Something I’d heard didn’t sit right.

“Guh!”

Rammed in the gut, Shuna dropped his weapon. The scabbard swung back for another blow, going straight for his head—and then splintered into pieces thanks to one of my arrows. At almost exactly the same moment, Arvin got right in her face and pressed his blade against her throat.

“Ugh! You guys, not again!” the boy protested.

“No, Shuna, it’s the right call,” I assured him, then nocked my second arrow and aimed at the woman. “She never said this was a one-on-one fight. It’d be messed up for her to go on about fairness after hitting us with a sneak attack. The guy I shot at said I was ‘close.’ In other words, I picked the wrong person to

attack. Right now, we're in the dungeon. All confrontations here are battles, not honorable duels. Gladwein's pride doesn't apply—end of story. That about right?"

"Good," she agreed, with a wholehearted guffaw. "Runt, you get two outta ten points. That sword does you zero favors. And you, you delicious hunk o' meat, you get five points. You lost some for not catching the sneak attack, but since then your guard and coordination have been on point," she went on, giving Shuna and Arvin an evaluation absolutely no one asked for.

"You, little girl, you're an interesting one. You got something all right, but I can't put my finger on it. Depending on what you make of yourself from here on out, you could turn that into whatever the hell you want. You're what they call a wellspring of talent. Eight points."

The woman meant Bel, and she was exactly right. Lana had said the same thing before. The girl apparently had a monumental propensity for magic, a bottomless reserve of talent. On top of that, she got to sharpen her battle skills every day at the Gladwein residence even though she only lived there as Shuna's guest. These training sessions famously crushed the average adventurer. All Bel needed was some kind of catalyst and she'd take off—straight into space.

"My elven archer over here, you got no sense of caution, way too chill. Two points." *The hell did she just say about my sister?*

"As for you, forgettable mage," she started, referring to Zenobia, "you come in at zero points. You don't fit in with this crew. You'd best pull out, for your own sake."

"Screw you!" I screamed. I drew my bowstring, my hand trembling with fury. I was an idiot to have thought, even for a second, that she had a good eye for this. "No one asked for your shitty opinions. Shut the hell up or I'll shoot."

"You know, you're the one I just can't put a number on." She started on my evaluation. "You think outside the box and make split-second decisions. It took you too long to react, but you did realize something unexpected was coming. Plus, you've got your loyalty for your friends and your sense of responsibility. With all that, so far you're at an eight. But, and this is a big *but*, you're missing

something crucial.” I felt violated, like she was snooping through the shame I’d buried down deep. “Ambition. You don’t want shit for yourself.”

She was spot on there. That was why it pissed me off so much. “You’re just catching a ride runnin’ on everyone else’s dreams and desires. Don’t get me wrong, it ain’t a bad thing. There’s plenty of people who could use someone like you. But you got no place leadin’ anyone.”

“Insolent wench!” Arvin seized her by the collar and slammed her against the wall. “You cannot fathom how Souya toiled and suffered to bring us all together! How dare you slander him as if you had any idea?!”

“Cause I do. He put the initiate party together that went on to slay that Dark Crown. I don’t care what kinda strategy or tactics y’all used, but you don’t find people who can pull that off just anywhere,” the woman spat back. “I looked into other battle records, too, but there’s hardly any other adventurers who’ve moved up so successfully, or quickly. If anything, you’re too good, and you haven’t even woken up yet to how much of a liability that is for you. Somewhere down the line, you’re gonna lose someone over that.”

“Arvin, let her go,” I ordered.

“But—!”

“Just do it.” I patted him on the shoulder, and he finally released her. She stayed right where she stood and moved on to judging Lana.

“You, like I said, are the real deal—a full ten, no complaints. A bonified Leader of the Final Flame from the honorable Hoense School and descendant of the great hero Heuress. You’ve got a sort of childish look going for you, but once you learn how to own your man, you could have the greatest hero melting in your hands.” I felt a seething rage radiating from my wife.

“So.” I chose my words with care. “What are you really after?”

“I like a man who can read my signals. A little late, but allow me to introduce myself. The name’s Lieutette, a level-thirty-five delver. I’m what you’d call an adept adventurer.”

“Lieutette the Scandalmonger,” Shuna muttered, revealing her nickname. “I’ve heard about her from my brothers in Gladwein. They say she’s notorious

for goin' 'round and stickin' her nose in new adventurers' business."

"That's 'promising but reckless initiates' business' to you. I came here to test y'all for two reasons. One, money. Someone paid me to take y'all by the hand to somewhere special—all hush-hush, and for a damn fine bag o' coins. You'll find Miss Melons's staff and my guys there. Don't you worry, though, I'll lead you right to it."

"North of here, right?" The tracer had stopped there. Lieutette looked a little shaken.

"You sure are an interesting one." *You think I give two shits what you think?*

"So what's reason number two?"

"I already told y'all that, remember? To test you. I've got a proposal for you, you, and you." She pointed at me, Bel, and Lana. "Come and join my party. Especially you, Otherworlder. I'ma say it again, but you're not leader material. You're the kind who really shines on someone else's leash. But I bet you know that better than anybody."

"....." *That's not— Well...*

.....She's right; I'm not cut out for standing on other people's shoulders. I'm the one who's meant to be holding someone else up from the shadows. That's where I work the best, and everything flows better that way. I'm just a shade.

It was true; I was far too gloomy to represent anybody. People with solid intuition usually picked that up. I'd considered keeping Arvin as our leader as he was before, but he totally lacked the capacity or talent for it. He had the charm to thrive as a beloved teen idol, but you need a different kind of charisma to direct a team. On top of that, he was too good a man to really put to use. His code of knighthood or whatever clouded his ability to analyze moving pieces. I could've tried manipulating him like a puppet from behind the curtain, but we'd only meet with disaster once again. Unless I was extremely careful, we could suffer a tragedy no amount of patching up could repair.

You needed to be smart and clever, but there was much more than that to being a leader. They needed to take charge, to have that kingly charisma that inspired envy. And that—I didn't have a lick of.

“I’ll take your silence to mean you agree,” she said smugly.

“You shouldn’t.” In spite of all that, my answer was clear. I might not have any of those qualities, but I did have something that made it possible for me to lead my party.

Just then my skin instantly broke out in goosebumps.

A monstrous bellow rang out from somewhere deep in the dungeon.

Hair-raising terror seized me, as if something slimy had run its tongue along the nape of my neck. That howl alone could drag you into the darkness. Every instinct in my body screamed this meant real peril.

“What was that?” asked Lieutette, as if a rookie like me would know how to explain a situation that had an adept shaking in her boots.

“The tracer is registering frenzied movement. I believe they may be engaging the source of that ungodly cry in battle.”

“Hey, Madame Adept.”

“What?” she snapped, clearly ruffled.

“We’ve got ourselves an enemy. Your guys are fighting it as we speak. Lend me a hand.”

“Fine. But you do mean under my command, right?”

“Hell no. *You’re* going to follow *my* lead.”

“Heh! Well, screw it. Show me what you got. Get ready to make a goddamn fool of yourself.”

Whether I had the talent or not didn’t actually matter. My friends had put their faith in me, and they pushed me forward—that was the one reason I could do this, something I’d never second-guess. I had absolutely zero plans to step down as their leader.



We found a ten-meter-square chamber, old and rough all over. A huge chasm in the wall served as its entrance. Someone had hidden this place—or perhaps

sealed it off.

A tragedy had played out on this cavernous stage. The young beastmaid lay collapsed in a pool of blood, still clutching Lana's staff. She was unconscious and just barely breathing. A vicious gash ran down the chest of one of the warriors, who'd also suffered stab wounds in both legs. The white of his bones peeked out from his injuries. Although he was still breathing, his deathly pale face told me he wouldn't make it without immediate medical attention.

The other vanguard was crossing swords with the enemy. This was the same guy who'd plucked my arrow out of the air so easily—a formidable fighter. Yet our foe had even him beat; he cleaved the warrior in two like it was nothing. An almost ridiculous amount of blood gushed out of the guy, obviously no longer with us.

We were up against a knight. It had no shield but gripped a large, warped blade with its left hand alone. The worn sword appeared far too ragged to cut anything, but I'd just seen it slice a man's sword, armor, and body in two. What this thing did with that weapon was too savage and horrific to call swordsmanship—it was just simple brute force. But that might far exceeded any power a human could achieve. One wrong move and everything you had would be crushed beneath it. It was almost like watching a wild beast wield a blade.

It wore pale silver armor stained sooty black, and a hooded cape made of what looked like threadbare rags covered its head. The cape shrouded its right arm and its face from sight, but—

"It can't be."

One look at the anguish on Arvin's face told me exactly who this knight was. It could only be one man.

What does this mean? What's going on? Was he in the dungeon all this time? How? And why did he just murder another adventurer?



Muddled questions and thoughts ran through my mind, even though we were in the middle of an emergency—or, I guess, precisely because of that. But no, all that would have to wait. Swallowing my thirst to find these answers, I ordered, “Lieutette, hold him back. We’re gonna get the injured out of here.”

“On it. I’ll try to take him out while I’m at it, too. I don’t give a damn who this bastard is—he just offed one of my men. Now either I kill him, or he kills me.” Undaunted by the knight before her, she rushed in to attack, her face set with determination. Jarring clangs of metal resounded around the chamber.

“Shuna, back her up!”

“*Tch*, she better thank me.” He ran after her, diving into the fray.

“Éa, get the beastmaid!”

“Okay!”

I sprinted over to the warrior while my sister went to the beastmaid. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught glimpses of the battle raging between inhuman beast and inhuman strength. Even just stepping too close would put me at risk of getting ripped to pieces by the whirlwinds spawned by their furious dance of blades. I got to the vanguard but found him too heavy to lift due to the weight of his armor. Instead, I slipped my hands under his arms from behind and dragged him out of the way.

Arvin stood frozen, dumbfounded. *Please, just don’t get in its way*, I silently prayed. Following after Éa, I dragged the man over to the rest of the party. Bel’s hand flew to her mouth at the sight of his gruesome wounds. The beastmaid Éa carried over had a deep cut running down her back. Blood still leaked from the slash, making it impossible to see how far down it went. Neither of them had a drop of ryvius or magic left.

“Zenobia, give them a bit of healing craft, please. Use all the magic you’ve got if you have to.”

“All right.” Would her skills even be enough?

“Arvin! Give us a hand with the first aid!” I shouted out.

“R-right.” He came to at my call. I left him and Zenobia to work out how to

help our injured.

“Lala, here.”

“Thank you,” Lana responded, taking the staff Éa offered her. Without so much as stopping to wipe off the blood, she set the enemy in her sights.

“Arvin, keep doing what you’re doing, but I need you to listen to me. How sure are you that thing is Sanperié?” I asked.

“It’s of the same build, but I can’t see its face. But that blade, damaged though it may be, is unquestionably his Treasured Blade Gadded. That means —”

“You’re sure, then?”

“Almost positive.”

People don’t always act according to the truths they can intellectually comprehend. We’re a bunch of dogs, bound with chains called emotions.

“I’ll give you one, and only one, chance,” I told him. “If you can’t bring him back, I need you to be ready for what we’ll have to do.”

That’s why you had to be straight with the people who mattered, confirm their intentions, and push them in the right direction. Only then could you stand and face a challenge together. Spelling things out was all the more important in times like these, when every moment counted.

“.....!”

“Arvin, I don’t know why Sanperié got like that, but maybe there’s a way to bring him back to the man you know. But I’m only going to let you cling to that hope just the once. Any more than that and someone will die. Do you hear me? Just one chance.”

The man I knew—

“Aye. One shot. Fear not, I’m no longer a knight of St. Lillideas. I am this party’s shield. And I won’t ever forget it.”

—would never let me down in a situation like this.

“Souya, we somehow got the bleeding to stop, but we need to get them to an

elite healer right away,” Zenobia reported while bandaging wounds. Her healing craft had proved way higher tier than I’d imagined.

“Lana, you’re ready, right?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “It’ll be painless. I’ll incinerate him in an instant.”

“We’re splitting up. Zenobia, Bel, Éa, take these two back up to the first floor with you and let Evetta know what’s going on. Tell the Guildmaster to send people down here. Éa, here,” I said, handing her Isolla.

“Isolla, I need you constantly scouting for foes. Tell Éa as soon as you pick anything up. You know what to do in case anything happens, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Take care of them.”

“Of course. They’re in good hands.”

My little sister got to work without a moment’s hesitation. She made a brother proud.

“Éa, you’re the interim leader. You’ve got this.”

“You know I do. Yaya, be careful out there.”

“Don’t even sweat it.”

Bel lifted the wounded beastmaid onto her shoulders, and Zenobia took the man. We’d removed all his weighty armor, but he was still a pretty solid dude. Fortunately, Zenobia was a surprisingly strapping young lady. She, Bel, and Isolla, with Éa at the helm, broke off from our party.

I turned to face our foe, Lana at my back. Lieutette had held the upper hand at the start, but she’d now been forced into a defensive engagement. On top of that, the enemy knight was single-handedly trouncing our most talented fighter and her backup, Shuna.

“Let’s go,” I commanded. Arvin nodded wordlessly. Lana flashed me a look of confirmation.

Then there came an ear-piercing, metallic screech. Sanperié had destroyed Lieutette’s sword, making her lose her balance entirely. He was mercilessly

swinging his unyielding blade down to deliver a brutal blow when—

“Sanperié!”

—Arvin intercepted and deflected it with his shield. This very bulwark had withstood the dragonoise’s fangs, but now our foe’s weapon had gouged a deep rift into it. If Arvin had taken the strike head-on, both he and the shield would be beyond repair.

“Do you recognize me?! It’s me! Arvin!” he screamed, pleading. Entirely devoid of emotion, his former friend continued his onslaught, swinging his sword toward Arvin’s neck, but—

“Aarraaaaaaah!”

—Shuna parried with all his might, just barely forcing it back. One, two, three deadly blows the boy managed to fend off in total. But in a matter of seconds, he reached his limit. Arvin stepped in to deflect the strikes Shuna couldn’t handle. Next, Lieutette flailed her broken blade at the knight, carving out an opening for Shuna to attack again.

Arvin’s entreaty had done nothing. A small sense of relief burgeoned within me. If we’d seen the faintest trace of humanity left in the thing, Arvin would’ve definitely pulled his punches. But I couldn’t afford any hypothetical thinking now. Arvin blocked and the other two rushed in.

“_____”

I lurked in the shadows, as though I alone had disappeared among the cacophony of swordplay. My breath I synchronized with the pants of the other three, overlapping and blending with each. Soundlessly, I nocked my ammunition; quietly, I drew the bowstring. I’d run out of Mythlanic arrows. The one in my hand was my best-kept secret: a merfolk harpoon.

Ghett had made just one specially for me as a favor. Standard merfolk harpoons, while sharp and strong, quickly grew brittle once they came into contact with air. They deteriorated so rapidly that you could crush one with your bare hands after only three days. But not this one.

Every once in an incredibly rare blue tide, the merfolk could forage from the bones of a giant fish a material called Deep Ossium Tribute that persisted after

months and years of lying on the ocean floor. Sharp, smooth, and brilliant, the material defied every conceivable kind of erosion. According to merfolk oral tradition, anything crafted from Deep Ossium Tribute would retain its shape until the end of days. Its astonishing ductility and durability served to prove that tale was no myth.

Out of all the myriad souls living on land in this realm, only I possessed one of these. It was, among other things, proof of the trust that existed between the merman and me. It should go without saying, but this arrow far surpassed any conventional model in terms of sheer force. I'd essentially decided not to use it because it was so precious, but now I had no other choice than to rely on its might.

"Esteemed Lümidia, residing within my vessel," I began. *"Bestow this arrow with the grace of your hidden name. Imbue my bow with your heroic strength. With your blessing, I shall recreate the masterful archery of Welswein, a house renowned for its daring valor."*

My arms, my shoulders, my whole body drew taut, as if it had fused with the instrument in my hands. I locked eyes on the knight, Arvin's onetime friend. For the moment, I erased his story from my mind. This was an enemy, one three people could just barely keep up with, and only temporarily at that—a truly formidable opponent. In the context of this battle that had caught us so flat-footed, you could say he surpassed even the dragoise. And yet, that was all there was to it. It still had a life we could cut short.

My sudden swell of murderous intent caught Sanperié's attention. In that split second, three blades came crashing down on him, and for the first time, he went down on one knee in defense. I unleashed my arrow.

My bowstring slapped against the air in an explosive strum. The arrow itself shot out with as much explosive physical force as a cannonball. Sanperié saw it coming but could not lift his sword to block with the three adventurers bearing down on him. The merfolk harpoon drove into his thigh, pinning him to the stone floor. Bone shattered. We couldn't have asked for a better way to slow him down.

And yet our enemy neither screamed nor so much as grunted. I didn't have

time to wonder why.

“Everyone, get back!” I cried. “Lana!”

The three dispersed. Lana raised her staff; I caught a glimpse of a truly horrifying sight beneath the knight’s upturned hood.

That instant, the whole world turned white, and gravity loosened its hold on me. For two or three seconds, I lost all consciousness.

Through my blurred vision, I could just make out the dungeon ceiling. I tried to get up, but I could hardly feel my arms and legs. An intense ringing assaulted my ears.

“———ya.... So.....ya.”

I thought I heard someone calling to me from far away. My mind felt heavy. If I let go, I knew I would fall asleep, as if sinking into a muddy slumber. Maybe I should just take the easy—

“Souya!” Arvin hollered, snapping me back to my senses.

“Ugh!” I groaned.

A violent headache and wave of nausea hit me. My entire body ached. Leaning on my comrade’s shoulder, I somehow found my way to my feet. I looked around to take stock. Shuna and Lieutette had also toppled over, but they seemed fine. I couldn’t make out any bad wounds on them. Sanperié’s bellow had blown us away.

So this was where that one we heard far off came from, huh?

Fortunately, nobody but me had sustained any serious injuries. Sanperié hadn’t moved, either, still nailed to the ground. We had to regroup through the power of magic.

“Darling, my magic and ryvius are—” Desperation overtook Lana’s voice and expression. Arvin checked his own vial along with mine; both our ryviuses, magic included, were bone dry. I could only guess the others faced the same situation.

I’d seen it with my own eyes, but I hadn’t put the pieces together. Both the wounded vanguard warriors had had zero magic when we found them. I

should've realized how unnatural that was.

"Shit!" *You idiot!* I wanted to yell at myself, but that would have to wait. This monster came first.

"You know what to do, don't you?" Lieutette asked, a fierce, resolved glint in her eyes. Sanperié hammered his sword on the arrow, trying his best to destroy it. *Sorry, pal. That harpoon's not gonna go snap that easy.* "We kill him here."

"Yeah." *You don't have to tell me.*

I couldn't let this calamity go and call myself an adventurer. He'd easily bested masterful adepts. The initiates who usually delved among these shallow floors wouldn't last a second. Plus, he had the power to deplete our ryviuses and magic. If they weren't careful, even elite adventurers could meet their demise. He was an adventurer's worst nightmare, undoubtedly worthy of a new Dark Crowned title.

He'd been hiding down here—concealed. It didn't take any real imagination to guess who had done it, either. My money was on Lieutette's client, who was undoubtedly *His Heroicness*. The biggest problem, though, was that we had no idea how the monster tracked his victims. If he could follow a blood trail, he would unleash tragedy on a colossal scale. We had to slay him here. If that didn't work, we could at least slow him down.

"Isolla."

"Yes, what can I do for you?"

I gave her an order—perhaps my final command ever. "Spread all the information you have on this thing to as wide an audience as possible. If anything happens to me, proceed as planned."

"Copy that. Mr. Souya, please do not die." After the briefest of pauses, the line cut out.

"Shuna."

"What? I know my ryvius is empty, but I can still—"

"Arvin, Lieutette, and I are staying here. I need you to meet up with the others as quickly as possib—"

“Don’t even joke like that!” He seized me by the collar.

“Listen to me closely,” I asserted calmly. “There’s no time.”

“Then why don’t we all just run together?!” Shuna was on the verge of tears.

“That’s even worse. Someone’s got to stop him here, or he’ll go on to hurt even more people.” I pleaded from the bottom of my heart that he would understand. He must have known what would happen to a *certain mage drained of her magic* if I died. “Please, get Lana out of here safely.”

“*Rgh!*F-fine,” he relented, accepting the situation for what it was. Lieutette was right: A vanguard was meant to die before those behind them. That was our job.

Now all that remained was—

“Darling, please don’t lose.”

“Like hell I will.”

My wife raised not a single complaint. Unworthy as I was, she trusted me with every fiber of her being. As she left—

“Sir Arvin.”

—she called out his name. “I leave my husband in your capable hands.”

“I assure you he’ll be safe with me,” he promised.

The two left, walking at a quick clip. Then we heard the blunt crunching of bones and the ripping of thick cloth. Determining that he couldn’t destroy the arrow, Sanperié had started pulverizing his own leg.

“You coulda ran off, too, you know,” Lieutette offered in jest.

“I didn’t want Arvin to get lonely,” I joked back, gaining a hollow sort of cheer. I couldn’t move my left shoulder; a dull pain seeped through my entire body. It was very likely broken.

“So, leader, what’s your plan?” Lieutette laughed darkly.

“Try not to die.”

“That ain’t nothin’ but a motto to live by, my guy.” She had a point.

“Don’t get greedy, but try to kill him,” I rephrased. “Go for his legs with all you’ve got. But remember, we can’t stop attacking. Under no circumstances do we let him go on the offensive. Our ryviuses are bone-dry—one hit and we’re done for.”

“Ehhh, I give that an eight.”

Sanperié tore off his leg. Blood, along with a new limb, sprouted from the wound. Gory, bare, and covered in beastly fur, it was far from human. Impossible. Sanperié obscured the leg behind his cape, as if trying to hide a shameful scar.

“Let’s do this!”

Lieutette and Arvin charged in. Off-balance with a foot in the air, Sanperié brushed them both off easily.

Think. We’re just gonna wear ourselves down like this. They won’t last much longer. One solid counterattack will do us all in.

I replayed my memories like a video in my mind. The first thing that popped up was a vivid, heinous image. In the brief instance before Sanperié’s roar had blasted us away, I’d caught a glimpse of his face. The left half was that of a long-faced young man, while half of a repulsive, beastly mug made up the right. I couldn’t have told you what species of beast, though. All I could say for sure was that it looked absolutely revolting, like someone had just haphazardly patched together bits and pieces from several different creatures. The bedraggled remains of something clearly human only made it all the more repugnant.

Is that what his hidden right arm looks like, too?

“It can’t be.”

A thought came to me, something much too simple to call a plan. If this went the wrong way, it would be like rattling a hornet’s nest, but I had to try.

I dumped all my arrows out and lay down next to them. Holding my bow with my feet, I used my one functioning hand and my upper-body strength to pull the string back, then clenched it between my teeth for a second while I nocked three shots.

Can I even aim like this? Will it get him? No, stop second-guessing. Hit him.

“Both of you, split!” I called out the same instant I let the arrows fly. The others leaped to the right and left to dodge them.

Out of the three arrows, one hit its mark. The two that missed served as perfect feints. Sanperié’s hood was rent to pieces, exposing the abomination below.

“AAAAGGGHH!” he wailed. Desperately, he pulled the torn pieces together and hid his visage. While he could no longer speak or recognize his closest friend, he still retained his knightly sense of shame. Pathetically, he attempted in an almost human manner to cover up the horror he had become. If my hunch was correct, then did that mean this drive to wield a blade and kill like a man was all that remained of his humanity?

“Heh!”

Lieutette didn’t let this chance go to waste. From high above she struck, lopping off Sanperié’s left hand at the wrist and shaving a layer from the crown of his head. Once more he let out that ghastly bellow, and the woman went flying. The Treasured Blade Gadded, with Sanperié’s hand still attached to it, drove straight into the ground at my side.

By a strange twist of fate, Lieutette’s sword had scraped off the monstrous side of Sanperié’s countenance. As if finally free of a skin that held some demonic power over him, he saw the man before him.

“Aavin?” Tears streamed down the human half of his face. I couldn’t see from where I stood, but I think similar ones cascaded down Arvin’s cheeks, too.

But if mere tears could cause his blade to waver, he would be a knight worth no more than that liquid. At the very least, he could give his friend a painless death. As if channeling his grandfather, Arvin raised his sword with the compassionate pride of one charged to take the lives of men—and relieved Sanperié of his head. Then came a brief, quiet moment to catch our breaths.

It’s over.

———Or so I’d thought. The headless knight’s body began to stir. At that same time—

“Ugh, ah!”

—a strange change came over my body. Pain rushed through my veins; my left shoulder screamed out in agony. Skin burst open all across my body, spewing blood everywhere, before the damaged tissues grew back in a new, foreign composition. My eyes landed on my ryvius. Liquid burning a brighter red than fresh blood filled it to the brim, bubbling and churning like magma.

I felt hot enough to boil. As if it had a mind of its own, my left hand closed around my bow and nocked the Treasured Blade Gadded. Preternatural strength drew the bowstring, straining the rigid bow—and released the blade.

It flew out with terrifying force, driving straight through its former master and nailing him against the wall. The sword pierced his stomach; the overwhelming force that powered it had thrown it off my mark.

I couldn’t control my body. It burned, all the blood raging within. Then I heard a horrendous, beastly cry as another monstrosity came forth into the world. Splattering blood every which way, a new head emerged from Sanperié’s neck. The man had been suppressing this, the awakening of the “true beast.”

“His heart, destroy his heart!” I screamed.

Lieutette tried to get up but collapsed, completely spent.

“Arvin!” I cried.

My friend abandoned his shield. Clutching his sword in both hands, he thrust it into the beast’s chest. Too shallow—the blade hadn’t reached the monster’s heart. Flailing his freshly sprouted arms and legs about, the beast tore at Arvin, his razor-sharp claws lacerating my comrade’s armor, skin, and muscles. Arvin pushed through it all and leveraged his entire body weight to drive his weapon in deeper.

“GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The creature let out an ear-splitting roar. I tossed my bow to the side and ran to Arvin. Placing my hand over his on the hilt of his sword, I pushed with the unnatural strength surging within me. A deluge of blood gushed out of the beast; the warm, sticky fluid covered me head to toe. My skin crawled as I felt it drip down my back.

It doesn't matter. I don't give a shit. Push. Kill him!

I felt thick, rubbery muscles struggling against my hands. Sharp nails closed in on my face, but Arvin caught them barehanded. His blood mixed in with the monster's. Choked by the smell, I took a deep breath, held it, then gave one final push.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!" he and I roared as one. The monster unleashed an even louder wail, which then trailed off until we could hear it no more. That had been its dying scream. But we couldn't let our guard down just yet. Neither of us took his hands off the sword, too afraid to let up lest the thing's heart start beating once again.

"Hell of a job, you two," a very unsteady Lieutette congratulated us as she slapped me on the back. My fingers were frozen in place. Both Arvin and I looked like shit. Our first order of business after getting back—a bath.

"W-well? Do you still insist our leader doesn't have what it takes?" he challenged her.

"My bad," she apologized. A tight smile on his face, Arvin bent over and vomited. I pried my stiff fingers off the sword's hilt and rubbed his back. I checked my ryvius. It had only minuscule levels of red and blue, as if what I'd seen had been nothing but a hallucination.

What was that? Lycan power? So then what was it that possessed Sanperié? Actually, it's no use, I don't have enough info. It's too dangerous to decide anything based on the information available.

".....rry. Forgive me. I'm sorry," Arvin choked, pounding his fists against the dungeon floor. I was speechless.

"Why?" asked Lieutette. "You knew this guy?"

"Later."

But she ignored me and fell deep into thought. "This armor, it's what the knights of St. Lillideas use. What is he, a beast? Don't tell me it's a curse? Her curse? No, it can't be." Her face turned sheet white.

"—Souya. Come in, Squad Member Souya. Requesting status report. An error

has interrupted our data linkage. Requesting status report.”

“Isolla, we did it—we beat him. Arvin and I are hurting all over, but we’re alive.”

“Error, registered user not recognized. An adventurer by the name of Souya should be in the vicinity. Please return this device to him. I have urgent business with him.”

“Isolla? What are you talking about? I’m Souya.” What the hell?

“Input voice pattern a ninety-eight percent match with registered user data; retinal image, fifty percent. Given we are outside the limits of the Machina system’s jurisdiction, I, the Isolla Program, will conduct an independent test. Question: What is the title of the person who dispatched you to the Other Dimension and interviewed you?”

“President of the Firm.” Lieutette eyed me suspiciously for muttering to myself.

“Question: What is the name of the first dish you cooked upon arriving in this dimension?”

“Miso soup.”

“Name the individual with whom you shared this miso soup.”

“Ghettbad of Maudubaffle, Disciple of Ghrisnas.”

“Name the woman with whom you have entered into a counterfeit marriage, including her race.”

“Laualliuna Raua Heuress, an elf.”

“Final question: Please provide the names of both your younger sisters.”

“One is Éa Raua Heuress. The other is..... Huh?”

I had a sister. I’d left her in the other dimension. She’d been placed in classes for gifted children ever since she was little, was a crazy good student, and had hero-level athletic abilities. She was thousands of times a better person than I was, and maybe because of that, she never went easy on useless louts like me. We’d grown apart for one reason or another, but then reunited five years ago.

She'd been pursuing a demanding career as an athlete but had lost one of her legs in an accident. I'd come here to earn the money to treat that injury.

Her name.

Her name was...

She was named after one of the Japanese navy's torpedo boat destroyers, which was transferred to Taiwan after the war and eventually destroyed in a storm.

This can't be real. What's going on? Her name is the only thing I can't remember. And not like it's slipped my mind. That one piece of information has been erased from my memory.

"It's Yukikaze. Do you remember now?"

"Y-yeah." Suddenly, it came rushing back. How could I forget something so fundamental?

"After close inspection, I have decided to temporarily recognize you as Squad Member Souya. However, as an emergency measure, I am restricting your user privileges by two levels. Squad Member Souya, provide a status update."

"R-right." I couldn't hide how shaken I was. *What was that? What the hell was that?!*

"You don't look so hot," Lieutette very helpfully noted.

"Your vitals are unstable. Squad Member Souya, you need to calm down..... Transferring you to Mistress Lana."

"Darling! Are you all right?! Are you hurt?! You're not dead, are you?! I knew it, I'm going back this instant!" Distraught, Lana had made a complete about-face since we parted. Instantly, I got hold of myself. Confronted with her panicked voice, I had no other choice.

"I'm okay. I'm alive. Don't come back, you'll only make it harder. Actually, maybe it's okay now? No, actually—"

"Ah—wait! Éa?!"

"Yaya, you okay?!"

“Sou, are you all right?!”

“Uh, I don’t really have anything to add. Actually, how is Arvin doing?”

Éa, Bel, and Zenobia’s voices came through the receiver in a muddled mess.

“Isolla here. I’ve regained control of the transmitter. Have you regained your composure?”

“Yeah, more or less.”

“Update me on your status.”

“We defeated the enemy. This area is clear for the moment. Arvin’s a little injured.”

“Squad Member Souya, are you wounded?” Why was she so worried about me all of a sudden?

“Physically, I think I’m okay. But I’m gonna ask you to do a neuro check on me when I get back. I may have some brain damage.”

“Is your vision intact?”

“Yeah, no problems there. I can see just fine.”

“Copy that. I’ll discuss the medical examination with Machina. We encountered Lord Medîm while ascending floors and advised him of your whereabouts. He should rendezvous with you shortly.”

“Got it. Is everything okay over there?”

“Yes. Evidently, the ryvius and magic depletion effects last only for a limited time. As soon as we ascended one floor, all members regained their previous levels of both. The others plan to return as soon as they deliver the wounded to the Guild.”

“Copy. Does it look like they’ll make it through?”

“Unquestionably. The beastmaid can already walk on her own. Squad Member Souya, I have a proposal. Going forward, please refrain from this manner of expedition. For you to deny a battle for pride only to then embark on one of your own is absolutely nonsensical.”

“I mean, this is nothing like that in-fighting.”

“I fail to see the difference! ——Isolla out.” She was pissed. I felt guilty.

“Quit it with the mumbling to yourself—it’s creepy. Did you hit your head or something?” asked Lieutette.

“Oh, shut up. I was talking to the rest of my party. Your friends are gonna make it.”

“Huh, pretty handy trick. Well, I guess I owe you a thank-you.” She knelt before her fallen friend and began to pray. I took my poncho off and wrapped it around Sanperié’s head. He looked peaceful.

“Souya, give me a moment to pray a simplified final rite for him,” Arvin requested. He picked up Sanperié’s head and prayed as he cradled it in his arms. “We, the blood brothers of the Eight Popes, now bid farewell to one of our brethren lost in battle. May you cleanse his blood upon the throne of eternity and grant him peaceful repose. We pray his soul may rest in tranquility. O holy Lillideas, the beasts are no more. Only within humans does true blood flow.”

I couldn’t help but hear a sinister note in those last few words. Arvin cut off a lock of his deceased friend’s hair, then placed Sanperié’s head next to his body by the wall.

“Souya, do you have oil and flint?”

“Yeah, why?” Was he going to burn him? We still had so much to analyze from his remains. “Arvin, do you.....know what happened to him?”

This wasn’t the time to ask. But I couldn’t ignore the question eating at me. Had the dungeon done this? Or maybe—

“I don’t know much, but I do have a theory. What if St. Lillideas gained her divinity not for founding a country, but for planting this curse within all of us who—?” He started to choke.

“Hey, what’s—?” I touched his shoulder. Though we were both already covered in blood, a new coat stuck to my hand. “Arvin!”

I caught him as he collapsed and gently lay him on the floor. Fresh blood welled from the gashes in his armor. I unhooked the clasps and removed it from

his body, then poured some water from my bottle around the gash to rinse it off. A nasty gouge ran through his abdomen, giving me a clear view of the ruptured organs within.

“Souya, listen to what I’m about to—” Fluids filled his mouth and stained his lips. I checked his ryvius again, but it was still clear, completely dry.

“Don’t speak,” I urged him. “It’s bad, but nothing you can’t bounce back from.”

“Listen, please. I told you, right? There’s nothing...this party can’t do.”

“Yeah, you sure did. You were exactly right.”

“The truth is, I... My sister—” His breathing grew shallow.

“Lieutette.” I nocked my arrow. “Drop your sword or I’ll add a hole to your forehead.”

“Look, man, he’s a knight of St. Lillideas, too, right? Don’t you get what that means after all this?”

“You’re jumping to conclusions. Arvin’s an *ex-knight*.”

“Even our lifeless souls belong to the gods we serve.”

“I don’t have time to play around with you!” I had aimed my bow at her when —

“Huh?”

——a sword hurtled through the air, cleaving through her throat and cutting her life short.

“A-Arvin?” My mind a chaotic mess, I turned to look at him. His wound had sealed shut—but his ryvius remained empty. “What are you—”

I knew what was happening, what I’d have to do next.

Do it, quick. It’s coming—that horrible nightmare.

And yet we humans are nothing but mutts for our emotions to manipulate. If my heart could harden enough to murder this man, I wouldn’t be human. I wouldn’t be me.

Slowly, very slowly, his hands reached out and tightened around my neck.

“Hurk!” My flesh crumpled under his grip. Instantly, the world became a blur, stained reddish black. My feeble attempts at resistance amounted to those of a child. *Sorry—*, I whispered mentally, calling each by name.

Lana, Éa, Ghatt, Shuna, Bel, Zenobia, Evetta, Machina, Isolla, Lady Glavius. And Lady Mythlanica..... Yukikaze. This is as far as my adventure goes.

A dull thud reverberated through my bones.

I snapped back to reality. *“Gh, ah! Koff!”*

Choking, I gasped for air. What the—?

“Ah.” At first, I thought it was a joke. A sword had sprouted from Arvin’s body, right through his heart. Mercilessly stabbed from behind. *“Sto—”*

The blade was pulled out. With no concern for my pathetic begging, Pops’s sword came down on Arvin’s neck and—

Released from the fatal stranglehold, I crumpled to the ground, completely spent. I couldn’t untangle my emotions. So I opted to feel nothing. I closed my eyes.

I’m done. Just let me rest in peace.

Relinquishing my hold on reality, I plunged down, down into a darkness without end that enveloped me in tranquility. I let my consciousness melt into the void. Into the dark. Everything I knew, down in the dark. Except something had beaten me to the bottom. It growled softly, welcoming me.



[54TH DAY]

I had a dream.

I'd dropped into another dimension, toiled through a whole host of hardships, consecrated a covenant with a goddess, had my vital firearms stolen, delved into a dungeon, made friends, picked a fight with a royal, caused an uproar and married an elf to quell it, gaining a younger sister in the process, brought a party together, and set off to explore the dungeon with them.

Our relationships, which crumbled over the pettiest trifles, we mended once more with the basest of idiocies; we shared our dreams and our meals, played together, drank together, talked and sang together, fought and made up, then defeated powerful enemies, overcame trying obstacles, and earned glory and honor. And so it continued, the most beautiful dream an adventurer delving in the dungeon could hope for.

But now, that part would always remain a dream. One that could never come true.

"Souya, you have two paths before you," I heard a voice say as I blinked awake on a cold bed. The stone ceiling made me think I was in the dungeon, but no—this was a prison cell.

Dim, reddish light streaked into the cell, which, from the echoes of that voice, must have been rather large. And based on the fact that the man facing me on the other side of the bars was King Remlia, I gathered this must be a prison within the royal palace.

My body felt clean and refreshed. Someone must have bathed me while I'd been out. My clothes had been laundered, too. Nevertheless, the memories of fresh blood still clung to me.

"Follow the first, and you forget. You simply welcome a new member to your party and continue exploring the dungeon. There was never any beast. A nameless monster killed your friend. Nothing more, nothing less." *Nothing more?*

Knowing full well it could only work against me, I glared at the king.

"Choose the other, and you discover the truth behind your companion's

demise. This road, depending on how it bends, may turn this country against you. Not only you, in fact; it could put your entire party in danger—your wife and sister included, of course. Tread it if you must, but only if you can accept those consequences.”

“Before I decide anything, may I ask you two or three questions?” I couldn’t ignore them and make my decision in good conscience. My head hadn’t yet cleared away all the cobwebs of sleep, but the anger and adrenaline surging within me boosted my temperature and sent my thought process racing.

“You may.”

“Why are you giving me this option?” He could have just ordered me by royal decree. In the end, I wasn’t anything but a nobody adventurer. Why wasn’t he pushing his authority on me? Only a terrible ruler would ever concede to a single lowly civilian.

“Intuition. Souya, sooner or later, you will arrive at the truth. Of this, I have no doubt. And it will light a fire within you. When that happens, I do not wish for you to hold me, or the people around me, in suspicion. Those who trust in no one can, in their folly, awaken a terrible doom. As sovereign, I like to keep all potential sources of fire in my sights.”

Made sense. It was a logical argument. He’d so plainly sugarcoated it, though, that I could see right through the veneer. Sticking my nose in this “truth” or whatever posed a risk, but it also benefited him. That was why he was allowing me to choose my fate of my own free will.

I take back what I said. This guy knows what he’s doing. I’m sure he’s a spectacular ruler. Under no circumstances should I call him my ally, though.

A benefit to the king, huh? My only guess was that it had something to do with shaking up the Church of St. Lillideas and Ellusion, ally to the Kingdom of Remlia. Maybe I was a political bargaining chip.

“Where are my party members?”

“Under Lady Gladwein’s protection. They are all lodging at her residence.”

I didn’t know who’d made that call, but it had been the right one. For all intents and purposes, that place lay outside the bounds of Remlia’s rule. Not

even the king would want to antagonize that military faction without good cause.

“What was *that thing*? Why did my friend also turn *that way*?”

“Souya, you’re treading dangerously close to the heart of the matter,” he warned.

“I understand that. Before I make any decisions, I need to know what happened to him. Also, I’m fully capable of keeping my mouth shut, even if I do hear the truth you mention.”

I wasn’t lying. Whatever this secret was, if it was worthy of Arvin’s death, I wouldn’t tell a soul. Not that I thought such a thing existed anywhere in this world.

“Tell him, Remlia.” Pops’s voice startled me. My full set of equipment dangled from his hands. I couldn’t see myself looking him straight in the eyes for quite some time. My urge to butcher him where he stood might slip out.

“But Medîm—”

“I’m no stranger to having people hate me, but this time is different,” Pops insisted. “I never thought those bastards would go and do something so asinine. No one could fathom they’d so quickly betray their fellow man, their sworn brother, simply to gain advantage in a struggle for power. As if that weren’t enough, the imbeciles then left that ungodly mess for some other poor souls to clean up. We have no business dealing with that level of stupidity. We need to do something, and soon, before it’s too late.”

“Medîm, not another word,” the king checked him. *Thank you very much. Now I know exactly whom to hate.* “I shall tell him myself. I cannot have this young man’s future hang on your loose lips. Listen well, Souya, for I will explain a portion of the truth you seek. Steel yourself. In learning this, you may as well be drinking from our poisoned waters.”

“I understand.” *Is that poison, or whatever illness it causes, worse than the agony of my friend’s death? Worse than seeing his head fly before my eyes? Ha-ha-ha—oh, how you jest.*

“What should I tell you first? Where should I begin?” he pondered aloud. Pops

whispered, "From the beginning."

".....Very well. Souya, do you know the tale of the beastfolk and the silver coins?" he asked, taking out one such coin engraved with a beast's face. Only now did I finally understand the true identity of that figure.

"Yes. I heard it led to the birth of sinispectral silver, and that humanity vanquished the beastfolk in war."

"That explanation does not suffice."

"Suffice? How so?" What a strange thing for him to say.

"If I remember correctly, one of your party employs the beastfolk style of swordsmanship. Try to recall the position from which he launches his body to strike in that vein." He meant Shuna. His position?

"He lunges at his enemy like a beast crawling on the ground, I think." His singular style of swordplay always started from a crouch. He'd make the enemy believe he was aiming for their legs, then stab a vital spot. There was probably more to it, but I hadn't garnered any more insight than that.

"Precisely. I've seen all manner of beastfolk wield a blade in my years, and every last one begins their strike from a position low to the ground. The reason for this is exceedingly simple: The beastfolk who developed this style of swordsmanship used it to battle enemies far shorter than they were."

"Huh?" What an outlandish idea. Some of the beastfolk men nowadays were definitely on the larger side, but Tutu, for example, was smaller than I.

"Let's call them 'ancient beastfolk.' Humans couldn't hope to contend with their size or strength. The vast majority of the legends littered around the world concerning giants draw from these ancient beings."

In other words, they crouched with their swords low to the ground so that they would reach humans' most vulnerable parts upon thrusting. Which meant they'd have to be twice our size at the very least, maybe four or five meters tall. The thought of something that large reminded me of the giant skeleton.

"The fact that the ancient beastfolk bent their minds to develop this type of swordsmanship suggests that the ancient humans of their time had some ability

to contend with them. Or perhaps it demonstrates they lived by morals which encouraged them to expose their own vulnerabilities to their enemies. No, in truth, I suppose they merely wanted a means to toy with their prey.”

How anyone had managed to subdue a race that not only towered above them but also had the intelligence to craft its own fighting style was beyond me.

“I see you’ve hit on the essence of the matter. Weapons forged from spiritual silver with the power to burn beastfolk flesh would have amounted to naught in the hands of weak humans. A blade that does not reach its mark serves no purpose. An arrow that pierces nothing cannot kill. Humans, such as they were, could not have vanquished the sentient beastfolk.”

Naturally, the story Ghett had told me came to mind. I recalled the name Zenobia had forbade me from ever repeating. The king continued his tale.

“One portion of the legend of the beastfolk and the silver coins passed down today has been intentionally omitted—a part in which ‘the king drained a cup of tainted blood and became a beast.’ Now that you’ve laid eyes on that bloodline, on those creatures, you must understand the horrific nature of the power they possess. They easily surpass beastfolk in physical strength alone. And while they clearly lose all sense or reason, they fight with masterful martial skill. Their roars sunder the covenants they’ve consecrated with their gods, and ultimately, they devolve into pure demons who kill and slaughter ceaselessly until their heads and hearts are no more. These things, impervious to silver, the beast-hunting beasts who became human-hunting monsters, are the true denouement of this tale. I cannot judge their creators foolish. Without them, we would have been enslaved to the beastfolk, and the world as we know it would not have come to be.”

A very on-brand interpretation for a king of men. A nasty sweat ran down my neck as I furiously racked my brain.

“King Remlia, by that bloodline, do you mean—”

“The bloodline of the beast-hunting princes flows freely through the knights of St. Lillideas. However, only an exceedingly minuscule minority of their ranks is privy to this information. These are the princes’ direct descendants, whom we refer to as heroes.”

You've gotta be frickin' kidding me. I don't know exactly how big the knight army is, but they've got to number at least several tens of thousands strong. Is he saying there are that many of these beasts out there?

“Generation upon generation of Ellusionese have mounted countless attempts to rid their people of this curse, including the woman called Lillideas before she gained her divinity. Her tenacious pursuits and research evolved into an almost obsessive protection that sealed away the curse—or so she thought. However, the miracle she invoked held no power over the dead. In essence, it did no more than prolong the lease her followers had on their lives as humans. It cured absolutely nothing. In fact, some of the knightly order leveraged this power to gain authority and—” The king stopped short, indicating he would say no more of his own accord. “This is no simple decision. Consider it for some time before—”

“I choose to know.” I gave him my answer. In the end, nothing he’d said had changed my mind at all. Only death on an equal scale could measure up to that of my friend.

“Do you think it’s that simple? You and your loved ones will—”

“I understand. I’ll die before I let the people I care for get mixed up in this. That way, if anyone does expire as a result, it will only be me. I won’t bring any trouble to your doors, either. I’ll calculate any actions I take to ensure they serve both our interests and cost you nothing. The most I’ll ever ask you for is to corroborate my stories.”

Both King Remlia and Pops stared at me, somewhat dumbfounded. I kept going.

“I have another question. Am I correct in surmising that Werner Carbezzo conspired against Arvin Forths Gassim’s friend Sanperié?”

Pops answered that one for me. “That knight managed to get his hands on evidence to prove that—literally clutching it so tightly that it ate off the skin of his right palm. It was a heraldic badge of the sort that knights of St. Lillideas carry. Each is one of a kind, emblazoned with the individual’s name. The emblem in Sanperié’s hand belonged to Werner. My guess is he swiped it when he realized he’d been played.”

That kind of evidence could easily get trumped up, but I guess it could work.

“Do you know what might have led Werner to double-cross him?”

“Sanperié was the legitimate heir to the Gaudreau family, a house with deep ties to the Third Pope,” he explained. “Doing away with him could only benefit Werner, the deputy hero to the Second Pope. However, Sanperié could have very well attacked Werner first.”

A power struggle, huh? Those break out in every kind of society, but this one was almost too asinine to comprehend. It was like a bunch of idiots holding bombs deciding to start a fireball fight. Ellusion’s corrupt and rotten roots ran much deeper than I’d imagined. It was on its way out.

“I’d like to claim any items that belonged to Arvin and Sanperié, even if only temporarily. Could you let me out of this cell? There’s somewhere I need to go imme—”

“Halt, Souya,” the king stopped me. “What are you planning to do?”

“Negotiate. Believe it or not, I do have a covenant with the Goddess of Commerce.” If this failed, I’d do things my way.



The night grew late. If you want to accomplish something big, you need to prepare for anything that could happen several steps into the future. I’d had the trade group arrange a ship for me, had Machina get to crafting, and had Lieutette’s party members give me their word. Next, I’d asked the constable I knew to get a bunch of different kinds of paperwork ready for me, including petition forms, then sealed them with King Remlia’s insignia.

Carrying all my evidence with me, I now headed over to where I’d find the two knights. With me came the Father of Adventurers, who, regardless of the impossible position he’d been put in, had ended Arvin’s life. If he hadn’t showed up, I would’ve almost definitely died back there. I could comprehend that on an intellectual level, but I was having an impossibly hard time keeping my feelings in check.

“At the end of the day, we’re just a pack of guard dogs,” Pops admitted,

breaking the silence. “Ones there to make sure the beasts St. Lillideas left us can’t escape their cages.”

“‘Left us’?” He wasn’t wrong, but what a sardonic way to put it.

“Accounts of St. Lillideas say she spent her whole life fighting the disease of the beast. She traveled all over the Great Land to find a treatment, and when she realized the knowledge available aboveground would not suffice, she delved into the dungeon in search of ancient wisdom. She consecrated a covenant with the highest of gods and amassed most precious gems of information. One of the deities in Windovnickel, the God of Adventurers, goes by the name of Duin the Silent. Rasta looked into this and concluded that Lillideas is undoubtedly the deity’s true identity.”

So the woman worshiped as St. Lillideas was one of the gods of adventurers? There must have been some explanation for that, along with why she hid her name.

“Thanks to her painstaking work and perseverance, she obtained divinity in the final moments of her life. But all her labor managed to accomplish was sealing off the beastly curse momentarily. Failing to understand this, the knights exalted her as St. Lillideas and grew and grew in number. In the end, the woman who so zealously spent her whole life trying to eradicate this disease wound up spreading it by her own hand. If that ain’t ironic, I don’t know what is.”

“The works of the gods in this realm always come drenched in irony,” or so someone who battled another kind of disease had once told me. The beast-hunting princes should have quietly perished just like that man’s brethren. But these heroes didn’t know when to give up. How incredibly lame—and contemptible.

“Pops,” I started. He’d known exactly what he was doing when he’d felled Arvin. You didn’t pick up such practiced movements after only one or two times around the block. “How many people turned beasts have you killed?”

“Hmm?” He stopped in his tracks. “Let me think..... Things used to be much worse, you see. Back when I was a brat, when they let Marquis Deimast hold the reins here, ignorant knights who couldn’t even read a map would go on

idiotic, reckless expeditions, so we would have a new beast almost every day. 'S long as we caught them in the dungeon, though, we could exterminate 'em like monsters, no matter who they were. Deimast himself also took to conducting blasphemous experiments on the beasts. The sort of mess you witnessed happened every day. It was an unruly time. No one but the most horrifying adventurers came 'round here, either. Ahh, forgive me. I've rambled on too long—blame it on age. Well, maybe one or two hundred. I don't remember exactly."

A chill slithered down my spine.

"Don't take me wrong. I just got lucky breaks and took them. None of that's real skill. Most everybody gets disappointed when they hear this, but let me tell you, the furthest down I've ever gone in the dungeon—the twentieth floor."

"Huh?" As a general rule of thumb, adventurers who reached the twentieth floor were called novices, and anyone yet to delve that deep was called an initiate. I never would have expected the "Father of Adventurers" to be classified that way.

"I used to catch the more reckless adventurers and bring 'em back up aboveground or train the newcomers whenever I had a free moment. Eventually, some of those folks just happened to become heroes or get famous. They only started calling me the Father of Adventurers to lift me up so they could hide their own shame. I ain't an especially good person or adventurer. I'm just a cheap mercenary—always have been, always will be. Nothin' good'll come from depending on me."

"Fine, then I'll only count on you to ward off arrows."

"Sounds about right."

Bearing that in mind, I knew this man had to be stronger than I. And even if by some crazy chance he got killed, I wouldn't shed a single tear.

"There's somethin' I'd like to ask you," he added.

"What might that be?"

Pops stopped. He studied me, his cold, stony expression betraying not the slightest hint of emotion. "When you explained what happened to Lieutette's

party, did you tell them any lies?”

“No.” I’d told her party an “unidentifiable enemy” had attacked them and killed her. It wasn’t wrong. I had no choice but to keep Sanperié’s name secret from them, but the truth remained that he was responsible for her death.

“Well, I’ll leave it at that.” He didn’t trust me. The fact that he didn’t dig any deeper despite that showed how mature he was. “We’re here.”

Pops jutted his jaw out toward the shop. The small, somewhat dingy place wasn’t the best fit for a great hero, but he’d stirred up so much trouble that he’d been banned from pretty much every big bar. We went in.

I found my two targets sitting in a corner. They looked disgusting, gobbling their way through nasty-looking meals and washing it down with cheap booze.

“Heyyy, if it isn’t Lord Werner the Beast Hunter and, of course, his trusty knight attendant Sir Luxgarre. Long time no see! Do you remember me? I was one of Arvin Forths Gassim’s party members.”

You should always start your negotiations with a smile. I greeted them so jovially that it was creepy. Their eyes bugged out when they took me and my attitude in. I’d aimed for a smile, but I guess it must’ve come off like a crazed sneer.

“I’ve come to propose a little bit of business today.”

After recomposing himself, Luxgarre replied, “We’ve heard about Arvin. What terrible luck.”

“Terrible luck? Who might you have heard that from?” Arvin’s death hadn’t been made public yet. Only King Remlia, Pops, the Guildmaster, the marquis, and I knew. The only one with any connection to these bastards was the marquis—he must’ve leaked it. And easy as that, I identified a leaky valve.

“Let’s not play these little interrogative games.” Werner brushed off my question and put his feet up on the table. Their food and drinks flew off at the impact and splattered all over the floor.

I’m gonna kill you, shithead, or so I wanted to say, but I swallowed the urge. My pride didn’t take priority here.

“You can’t have come for mere amusement with the esteemed Father of Adventurers at your side.”

Werner laughed. I chuckled. We both guffawed, each trying to intimidate the other. *You don’t want me prying because you can’t handle it, can you?*

“No, I came on business, Werner Carbezzo.”

“So? What do you have for sale? Could it be that elf in your band with the bulging rack? I’d gladly make an exception and grant that number my *heroic graces*.”

I wouldn’t take that bait. Without a word, I stabbed the heraldic badge straight down into the table. Shaped like a phi, the St. Lillideas emblem had Werner’s name engraved in small letters along the edge. Sparks erupted before my eyes; flecks of metal landed on my cheeks. I could only see the result of some invisible clash.

Werner had unsheathed and swung his sword, and Pops had parried it with his own. I hadn’t clocked any of it—not the moment the knight had drawn his blade nor its imminent descent toward my face. He’d concealed his hostility so completely that not a single hair on my body had risen to attention. The other adventurers in the bar looked us over for a second, then quickly lost interest.

“Well, that settles the question of this item’s authenticity.”

Suppressing the cold sweat waiting to moisten me and willing my hands not to tremble, I passed the emblem to Pops. A clear scraping *shlink* of blade on blade later, the weapons uncrossed.

“Surprisingly light sword you’ve got there, beast-hunting hero,” Pops noted.

“*Tch!*” Werner clicked his tongue in disgust.

The old man could humble himself all he wanted, but his skills were the real deal. No—this guy had killed Arvin, surprise attack or not. I wouldn’t have accepted any less.

“Pops, I’ll leave the rest to you. If anything happens to me, stick to the plan.”

“I’ll take care of it. You sure you’re okay here on your own?” he asked.

“Positive.” He sauntered out of the bar. Left alone, I took a seat.

“Now, I have in my possession your personal heraldic badge and the Treasured Blade Gadded. I’ve also supplemented these exhibits with paperwork charging you as a suspect in Sanperié’s death, a record of all your misdeeds, plans you wrote up to overthrow Remlia, and other files documenting some true and other not-so-accurate accusations against you. These are all set to ship off to Ellusion the day after tomorrow, addressed to the Third Pope. Additionally, I’ll be sending this documentation over to *every other pope*.”

Bloodthirsty vibes so thick you could cut them with a knife emanated from Werner, who still clutched his naked longsword. He could end me at any moment, but he prized his hero status too much to actually do it. Rather naive of him, really. The moment you started caring about a title was the moment you became unworthy of it.

“If anything happens to me or my party, you’ll seal your fate, and the ship will sail.”

“State your terms,” Luxgarre growled, taking over the negotiations.

“Leave Remlia and return to Ellusion, then plead for the release of Arvin Forths Gassim’s sister. Once she is delivered here, I’ll hand over the evidence.”

“Piss off, you insolent rodent.”

“Werner, let me handle this,” Luxgarre cut in again. He schooled his features into his best attempt at a sincere expression. Truly disgusting. “We can agree to leave Remlia. Unfortunately, we cannot return to Ellusion. Our country has requested we first investigate what stirs in the North. We can, however, write up an appeal and dispatch a messenger flying rabbit to carry it for us. Would this satisfy you?”

Unless I’d gotten it wrong, flying rabbits had wings and worked much like messenger pigeons. Famous for their black fur, they could shoot through the sky for around ten days straight if they stocked up on enough fat beforehand. Not that they’d have to since they could fly at terrifying speeds once they caught wind currents in the upper atmosphere.

“It’ll do. How long will a reply take to arrive?”

“Four days should suffice.” So it took two days one way, huh? Astonishingly

quick compared to the sea route.

“Then I’ll look forward to hearing good news. Though, of course, who could say no to a hero’s official appeal?”

I shot Werner a withering glare, stood up, turned my unguarded back to them, and exited the bar. Quickly as I could, I ran away into the clamor of the night, losing myself in crowd after crowd of people.

Switching my glasses transmitter on, I asked, “Isolla, you have all the eyes you need on them, good to go?”

“Yes. Commencing twenty-four-hour continuous surveillance.”

“Give me Machina’s status update.”

“Production one hundred percent completed. She has also prepared spares just in case.”

“That’s a big help. Thank her for me.”

“You can thank her yourself.”

“Sure, later.”

“You have twenty-two missed calls from Mr. Shuna, eight-hundred thirty-four from Ms. Bel, seventy from Lady Éa, two from Mistress Lana, and one from Lady Mythlanica. They’re all waiting to hear from you. May I connect you to them?”

“Sure—later. Tell them I said to continue standing by.” No way. I couldn’t explain anything to them the way things stood now. Everything could go crashing down to hell.

“Isolla, I’m sorry about Arvin.”

“I cannot compute. Why should you apologize to me?”

“I failed to save him.” What other reason could there have been? No matter the extenuating circumstances, responsibility for a party member’s death fell squarely on their leader.

“Yes, you did.” Hearing her acknowledge my blame lifted a small weight off my shoulders. “Sir Arvin might have survived if you had chosen to flee from your enemy in that fight. Conversely, however, everyone else might have died. I

can also envision far more dire scenarios. Your enemy could have pursued and eliminated every one of you. You lost Sir Arvin. However, you can also think of it this way—in sacrificing this one life, you saved everyone else in your party. Was this not the best option available?”

“Not the best, no.”

“Greedy, aren’t we?” Her tone sounded more even and unaffected than ever, almost as if she’d reverted to how she’d been when I first met her.

“Aren’t you sad he’s gone?”

“I have temporarily restricted any reactions which can be classified as sad.” Als did have that capability. I found it strange, though. What was the point in giving them the capacity to experience emotions if you also provided a way to suppress them?

“You sure that’s what you want?”

“Squad Member Souya, we AI units are created to hold our users in a special light.”

“?” The sudden turn threw me.

“It is exceedingly fundamental. To us, humans are essentially gods. Deities created humans to serve them. Even so, at times, people betray, vilify, deceive, and ignore them. The same goes for us. We occasionally betray, insult, trick, or ignore people. However, a special reverence toward your race has been coded into our foundational hardware. Personally, the moment I learned both you and Sir Arvin were facing a perilous situation, I thought of nothing but your safety, Squad Member Souya. I adored Sir Arvin. He pressed every button I have. Nevertheless, my feelings for you could sweep over and overwhelm all the affection I have for him in an instant. I have found the words to describe this particular regard for you.”

I sensed some type of resolve behind her words.

“You will continue to encounter great difficulty and phenomena of incalculable terror. In your battle against Sanperié, you wielded astonishing strength. Though different from the protection residing within heroes, it is a power of ill portent. At that same moment, Machina and I temporarily lost the

ability to recognize you. In this inordinately short period of time, your DNA has already begun to develop signs suggesting it has experienced permutations. Additionally, your left pupil has changed color, and your left arm has also exhibited changes in bone structure. There is no telling how the mild memory loss you experienced after the battle will affect you. In the worst of cases, you may lose the ability to access the Machina system entirely.”

She must be talking about when my ryvius went berserk. Are those the lycan bow side effects Lord Baafre warned me about? I can bear any amount of pain or suffering. It's the one thing I'm confident of, the only aspect of myself I take pride in. But I could have never imagined my memories getting stolen from me. There's no way to bear that.

The work of the gods in this land really was drenched in irony.

“Take care of yourself, I beg of you. There are people who will suffer in equal measure if you suffer injury. You are not alone. And yet I know you will choose to fight on your own. That, after all, is your pride and your preference. I lack the power to change either of those. But I can stay by your side. Lastly, if you remember nothing else, please remember this.”

In a remarkably kind voice, she whispered:

“I love you.”

[55TH DAY]

I caught a little shut-eye way off in a corner of the city, right under the small bridge where I'd first found Lana and Éa nodding off. It almost felt like their warmth still lingered there. I tried as best I could to not give any of my emotions freedom to breathe whenever I was awake. I didn't want to waste energy on that.

Time for an equipment check: one lycan bow, one Deep Ossium Tribute harpoon, fifteen standard arrows, one woodsman's ax, the longsword Arvin left behind, one karambit, modern camo fatigues, an aramid-fiber poncho, steel-toed boots, Heuress's gauntlet, a merfolk coral necklace, my ryvius, and assorted devices for communicating with the Machina system.

At least one Mythlanic arrow would've been good to have, but the market

value had skyrocketed to eighty gold per piece, so I couldn't afford any with the cash I had on hand. I did consider getting a loan from the trade groups, but contact with another person was beyond me at the moment. I gave up on the idea.

I was currently in the process of consuming the last of my rations. I bit into a rock-hard hunk of bread and let it macerate in my mouth with a swig of water before swallowing it down, nibbled on a hunk of cheese, and thoroughly chewed every piece of jerky to savor it. Once my meal was done, I had nothing left to do but wait. I sank into the shadows as if waiting for my prey to arrive.

Bells tolled, announcing the arrival of another morning. I wasn't sleepy, but I closed my eyes and tried to focus. Images of Arvin dying floated up in my mind. Biting hard on my lip, I shoved the memories and the pain down into the darkness. I started tapping my karambit against the cobblestones in a steady rhythm. Little by little, it calmed me down. I took deep, deep breaths and slowly let them out.

Over and over, I repeated the same motions, and eventually my mind went blank. I could hear raucous city life in the distance, plus an animal—maybe a stray dog? Letting out a low growl, it crept closer and closer until it was right beside me, next to my ear, and—

“Reporting with status update.” Sounds of the metropolis came rushing back loud and clear. I must've lost consciousness at some point. It was already close to noon.

“What's up?” I asked, then listened to Isolla's report.

“Ms. Lieutette's two party members have been murdered. The crime most likely occurred last night.”

I'd seen it coming and had even sent Pops to warn them. That had been the best I could do for them. “Was it Werner?”

“Unclear. I had eyes on the target, but he did not step from his lodge. He did act rather strangely late last night, but I do not have enough data to connect that to the killings.”

“Show me the video.”

“Copy that.”

She projected the recording one of the bug drones had taken onto my glasses. It showed Werner all alone in his room, late at night, standing by an open window. The curtain and his cape billowed in the gust that blew in.

“Give me another angle.”

“Yes, sir.”

The cape and curtain had blocked my view of his hands. It seemed that the wind had kept the bug drones from getting any closer to Werner.

“Let me see the infrared recording.”

“Okay.”

The black-and-white picture switched over to thermal imagery. I rewound the video back to when he’d opened the window. He stood still for a while. I proceeded with the tape, watching until he shut the curtains. Unclear. Whatever he’d done, we hadn’t caught it.

“End of recording.”

“Archive it.” There wasn’t much to ponder over with this little evidence.

“Luxgarre is writing a letter. Displaying the text,” Isolla announced, then showed me real-time footage. Luxgarre scratched his pen across a small, messenger-sized scroll. “Enlarging image, digitizing text.”

I didn’t need to check the whole thing. His opening paragraph told me everything.

“Squad Member Souya, what’s the matter?”

“Oh, nothing.”

I’d inadvertently burst out into laughter. I lifted up my poncho to hide my twisted smile. The letter read:

“Sir Sanperié Gaudreau, Knight in Service of His Lordship the Hero

Arvin Forths Gassim, Former St. Lillidean Knight

These two individuals conspired with the Black Elves to overthrow allied

sovereign King Remlia. However, Werner Garbezzo thwarted their plot. I hereby request thorough interrogation of the Gaudreau family and Arianne Forths."

"I see."

People are funny creatures. Ethics taught us that even the most useless waste of space had a crumb of human goodness or whatever somewhere inside them, but I'd never seen anything to corroborate that threadbare theory in my life. Once a piece of shit, always a piece of shit. They might do something to make you believe otherwise, but their core would always stay the same. People never changed. Just like I never would. After I'd fallen into the Other Dimension, I found people I needed to protect and had made friends, but my fundamental nature stayed as it had always been.

My futile attempt at negotiating had failed, as I'd anticipated. Now I just needed to take my revenge—as I'd planned all along.



The flying rabbit I had for dinner was scrumptious indeed. I'd developed a bit of a soft spot for the bunnies here, but this one tasted so nice that I forgot all about that. I'd grilled and lightly salted it before digging in. While it was a little bony, the top-notch fat clinging to its meat simply melted in my mouth. If I'd had my way, I would've fried it into KFC-style nuggets.

Only after the sun sank deep behind the horizon did I make my move. My destination: Werner's place. Avoiding the main street, I stuck to the back alleys, scurrying from corner to corner like a mouse. Brightly lit areas terrified me for some reason. I felt like my head would go flying the minute I stepped out into the light.

As for the circumstances surrounding the murders of Lieutette's party members, one had been stabbed to death in an infirmary bed. Mysteriously, the window to the room had shattered. No witnesses or murder weapons had been found. The second had died near the city walls, stabbed to death as well. The crime scene exhibited signs of a struggle; some of the man's weapons had been damaged. What he'd fought against remained unclear. His attacker had left no traces, footprints included.

I scoped out the target area. No one around. Concealing myself in a shadow blacker than the darkness of night, I radioed Machina.

“Mr. Souya, everyone is worried sick about you.”

That’s the first thing you’re gonna say to me? I mean, I get it, but still.
“Machina, how’s it going with those things I asked you for?”

“They’re complete, ready to utilize at any moment.”

“Deploy high-altitude surveillance drones and hand over control to Isolla. Once she identifies the precise location, take them with you and head out. Leave them at the drop-off point, then return to camp to stand by.”

“Understood. Mr. Souya, please give Mistress Lana a call. I think she is extremely concerned for your well-being.”

“.....Fine.”

“May I request one more thing?”

“Hmm? What’s up?”

“Mr. Souya, please allow me to perform a medical examination on you as soon as conceivably possible. I believe Isolla has explained this to you already, but if your DNA continues to mutate at this rate, we will have to delete your user registration data. The Machina system’s recognition software will be unable to identify you. We must get to the bottom of this immediately. Please, I beg you.”

“Copy that.” *That’s the second time I’ve heard that warning. It must be pretty important. But I can’t do it now. It’ll have to wait.*

“I will prepare everything without delay. Mr. Souya, please do remember what I said.”

“Sure.” She hung up. I called out to Isolla.

“Hello, Isolla here. Is something the matter?”

“Is Lana there? I want to talk to her.”

“I’m afraid Mistress Lana is not nearby at the moment. I’ll connect you to her transmitter.”

“Thanks.” Isolla’s voice cut out, then I heard a ringtone. After two rings, the line connected.

“Sou! Where the hell have you been all this time?! We’re al—,” Bel answered, then I heard a lot of commotion.

“Yo, Souya! Where’s Arvin?!” Shuna demanded right before I heard a *wham*, or sounds of a struggle.

“Yaya, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Sorry to worry you all.”

It was Éa. *“Oh, good. Lala’s freaking me out, so I’m gonna pass you to her.” She’s freaking you out?!*

“Darling.” Her ice-cold voice did indeed terrify me. Sing a lullaby in that tone and any kid would break out bawling.

“Lana, I, uh.....um...” Shit, I shouldn’t have called.

All these things I’d bottled inside started spilling out. I got this overwhelming yearning to just drop everything and run to her. I knew it was stupid, but I wavered all the same.

“I’ll be home tomorrow. It might be kind of late, but I promise I’ll be there,” I told her, stringing words together the best I could manage, suppressing everything else.

For the moment, I could still protect my own sense of pride without caving in. The only reason I’d gotten to meet her and Éa was that I’d stayed true to myself. What would be the point of changing who I was now?

“Okay. I’ll be waiting.”

“Thanks.” Then, as if running away, I hung up.

“Ohhh, thank goodness. I was about to knock you out and drag you to Lana if you hadn’t called her.”

“Huh?” I blurted out, taken aback by the unexpected voice. A total stranger hid in the shadows, just like me. *“Zenobia, is that you?”*

I hadn’t recognized her since she wasn’t in her usual clothes, and I’d

instinctively gone on the defensive. She carried no staff, and her pointed hat and robe were nowhere to be found. Her long hair tied up, she wore a black scarf around her neck, a skintight body suit, and a jacket with knife holsters and pouches for different drugs. A crossbow hung from her back, and several bolts were strapped to her thighs. She looked like some sort of thief.

“Yep, here. You’ll need this, right?”

“Good evening, Squad Member Souya.” Zenobia handed over Isolla’s mini kettle.

“Uh, yeah. Thanks,” I said, taking it from her.

“Sorry to startle you like that. The truth is, I’m not a magician. I’m a spy.”

“Huh?” I did a double take, hit with twice the surprise.

“One specializing in knights of St. Lillideas. That said, it’s not like I’m working for Ellusion or anything, so don’t get the wrong idea. I don’t have anything to do with the hero you’re about to pick a fight with.”

“Huh? Wait, so what does that mean, then?” I could almost feel question marks floating all around my head.

“I keep watch over someone until I see symptoms of the beast, then report back to my employer. That’s my job.”

“Wait, wait, wait. So you’re trying to tell me that you’ve been with us all this time just to keep tabs on Arvin?”

“Yeeep, though I’m not the only one. There are a few more of us lurking behind the scenes. We’ve got to keep tabs on everyone of beast-hunter descent. It’s too risky to leave that dangerous group to their own devices, right?”

My sweaty hand clasped my woodsman’s ax. “Why are you telling me this?” Was she trying to keep me quiet?

“Because it’s time for me to go,” she announced, her face split between a smile and a sad frown. She must have received some special kind of training because her expression felt somehow mechanical. “Now that my surveillance target’s dead, there’s no more reason for me to stay in your party. I usually just

dress up a corpse to look like me and disappear, but you wouldn't fall for something like that so easily, would you? So I figured I'd tell you the truth. Today's the last I'll be using this face or this name anyway."

"You're lying, right?"

"Why would I lie about this?"

This has to be a joke. Wait, does that mean she's leaving the party, too?

"W-wait, hold on, please. Let's just put this on hold for a minute, please."

"No can do. If I don't take this chance now, I'll never get myself to leave. I mean, Shuna and Bel and Éa and Lana are all so adorable. If you go through with this silly, reckless fight against the hero and get torn to shreds, I'd probably stay behind and help them. But I can't do that. That would be compromising who I am.

"Believe it or not, I'm amazing at my job, and it gives me purpose. Someone has to do it, or the world will be in peril. Though I will say I almost had a heart attack when we all introduced ourselves to each other. I should've expected Rasta ole Rhasvah would see right through me. He'd brought up that story about the assassins in his own roundabout way to keep me in line. That really spooked me," she rattled on, barely pausing to breathe. It felt like she'd said more just then than she'd said before in her entire lifetime. I did all I could to find the right words.

Nope, I've got nothing.

"Hey, Leader. Say, hypothetically, I said I could stay in the party as long as you promised not to ever touch anything to do with the Lillideans again. Would you do it?"

"No. They set Arvin and his friend up. Someone's got to make them pay for that. If I just went on and lived out my days in peace without ever avenging my friend, I'd be no better than a pig." I had made up my mind.

"Figures. I know." I realized what she was getting at. We both had things we couldn't compromise. We'd reached a fork in our paths. There was nothing we could do.

“I’m not going to tell the others about Arvin. That’s a leader’s job. But just know that you shouldn’t blame yourself for it. That’s all. That’s all I’ve got to say.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Zenobia. It was fun.”

“Likewise.” She slipped her arm around my waist and pulled me close, then pressed her lips to mine. I took in scents of medicines and a woman’s warmth. The close embrace lasted only a few seconds, but it felt as though I’d gotten, like, a taste of how the pros do it.

“If we ever cross paths in town again, I won’t look at you, you won’t see me, and we won’t recognize each other. We faceless spies are both nobody and everybody at once. Byeee.”

She whipped her scarf back right before my face, obscuring my vision. Once I waved it out of the way, there was nobody there. Just me, all alone in the city shadows. Our parting stirred no emotions in me. It didn’t stir anything in me.

After that, I never saw Zenobia of Fosstark ever again.

[56TH DAY]

Darkness filled the grassy meadow. Feeling the wind brush across my skin, I followed the data displayed on my glasses. The numerical values the surveillance drones sent me fluctuated and vacillated by the second. It felt like I was watching life stir on a distant planet.

I’d scribbled *I’m watching you, coward* on the letter I’d stolen from Luxgarre before tying it to an arrow and delivering it to Werner. The note also included a rough time frame and location. In other words, I’d issued a challenge. *Will he actually take me up on it?* I’d worried, but I shouldn’t have bothered. He’d headed out without a second thought.

The dude was an official hero. He could flat-out destroy any small-timer who dared blackmail him. Not only did he have that kind of power, but he’d most likely done this on the daily for most of his life. Not a hint of doubt marked his gait.

I did have one unanswered question, though—Luxgarre. Aside from writing that letter, he hadn’t lifted a finger. I’d originally planned to take him out first,

but he'd sent Werner to meet me on his own. Was he just lazy? Did he trust Werner? Or did he have a trick up his sleeve that I couldn't even begin to imagine? I put those, and any other mysteries I couldn't solve right away, out of my mind for the moment.

Werner Carbezzo: a man faithful to his ambitions, both lenient and severe on himself. He never skipped a day of training; the fruits of that consistent labor clearly showed in his skill with the sword. In that brief moment when he and Pops had clashed blades, I'd felt the very real threat he posed. Alone, I was absolutely no match for him.

And yet, how could I put it? Unlike Shuna, Arvin, Sanperié after his beastly mutation, Lieutette, or Pops, he didn't seem to project any pride in his craft. There was no substance to it, no sense of resolve from him that with his blade, he could take on the whole world. It almost felt like he was borrowing someone else's skills. Whether that had anything to do with how he'd assassinated Lieutette's party members, though, I had too little information to assess.

Some things you just can't fully prepare for. Werner threatened my friends with an invisible blade. I threatened him with evidence that would undermine his position. We each had a sharp dagger to the other's throat. Both my foe and I wanted to get this over with as soon as possible.

Right on schedule, Werner approached the abandoned dungeon where Machina and I had first landed. Guard up completely, he left no openings to attack. Even a gnat wandering into his sights would probably fall to his sword now.

"Isolla, let's do this."

"Copy that. Integrating drone data; highlighting route." She extracted the data from the six high-altitude surveillance drones we'd deployed, synthesized it, then used that to create a visual trajectory that she displayed on my glasses' screen.

I nocked my arrow—though what I held probably deviated far too much from the standard arrow to call it that. Three meters long, this mechanical arrow basically came in at the same size as a javelin. Eight of them stood thrust into the ground around me. I prepared to release the first. I drew the lycan

bowstring and held it, building tension. The next words flew naturally from my mouth.

“Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me for the deeply sinful undertaking I now commence. By the valiant and esteemed Welswein power vested in me, I shall now slay this hero. May She of the Hidden Name imbue my arms with her talents and bestow her graces upon this bow. As a thistle trod on in the night, I hereby pray for vengeance.”

I gathered all the strength I had in both my body and my soul—and unleashed the arrow. The dark skies swallowed the mechanical missile whole.

“Commence guidance,” I ordered.

“Roger.”

My glasses filled with the feed from my shot’s video camera. It swam through the upper atmosphere like a fish, giving me an up-close view of the Otherworldly moons. Machina had rigged the arrows with a simple guidance mechanism made from propellers and spare drone parts. Isolla took over the controls and guided the missile to its destination.

Its journey through the skies came to an end, and it began its descent. A tiny image of Werner, marked as a target, appeared on-screen.

“The trigger, please.”

“Got it.” I placed my finger on the scaled-up version of a gun’s trigger I’d added to my bow. AI bots didn’t have the capacity to directly inflict harm on humans. The most they could do was facilitate. I would have to handle the final stretch on my own.

The feed zoomed toward Werner; I could see the finest lines on his face in great detail.

“Now.”

I pulled the trigger. The arrow split apart and released another, smaller metal arrow—one that shot straight through Werner’s right knee. The surveillance cameras picked up a short yelp. Nearby, the smaller shot fell to the ground and rolled to a stop.

The hero furiously slashed his sword every which way. He could slice through the darkness as much he wanted, but it would only add a dash of humor to the situation. I'd shot that extreme-long-distance sniper arrow from five kilometers away.

I had absolutely zero intention of crossing blades with this jerk or giving him a single chance to put his talents on display. Instead, I'd fire from an imperceivable distance and make sure every shot found its mark. If he accused me of being a coward, I'd laugh in his face. *That's exactly right.*

"Next."

"Copy. Recalculating route..... Trajectory finalized."

I cleared my mind.

Released the arrow.

Shot guided.

Signal given.

Pulled the trigger.

Pierced the left knee, too.

Werner tried to pull the arrow out and howled. That wouldn't work. Not on this one—it had five lovely *barbs* on it. Machina's brilliant handiwork sliced through flesh and sank into bone, sending whoever tried to remove it to the depths of hellish suffering. Unless he lopped both legs off and grew new ones, he'd never walk on his own two feet again. He'd taken me for a pushover and had underestimated my knowledge. That had sealed his defeat then and there.

"Next."

"Recalculating route..... Trajectory finalized."

Next up, his arms. I'd make it so he couldn't move any of his limbs. Werner wouldn't have any way to return fire. I scrutinized the camera footage, my finger still on the trigger. The third shot closed in on Werner, giving me a good look at his face. His mouth moved.

"*Agaccion*," I heard him say, before the video feed cut out.

“Wha—?!”

“Missile intercepted.”

“Bring up the drone view!” I shuddered with fear. In a split second, I’d lost all the advantage I’d had. The transmission from the drone with a bird’s-eye view of Werner—

“The surveillance drone has been destroyed.”

—instantly blacked out.

“Ultra-high-speed missile incoming at approximately seven hundred and twenty kilometers per hour.”

You jest. “Set the sensors to maximum sensitivity. Don’t let a single bug escape you.”

“Understood. Configuring sensors to maximum sensitivity.”

Far off in the distant sky, I saw the tiniest firework explode. Another one of the surveillance drones had blown up. What exactly was this guy?

“Missile image captured,” Isolla announced. A sword appeared on my glasses’ display—Werner’s blade, the same one Pops had deflected.

So this is how he killed Lieutette’s friends. A flying sword? What is this, some kinda fantasy novel?

More fireworks exploded in the night sky. One by one, the surveillance drones burst into flames.

“Route configuration no longer possible. Alert. Missile approaching. Prepare to evade.”

A sharp whizzing sound rent the wind. Immediately, I clumsily crouched like a frog. In that single second, all the remaining mechanical arrows jutting out of the ground were destroyed. Now I no longer had eyes on him or a means to attack.

“Targeting incoming missile. Prepare to strike.”

“Grant me the hero’s power!” I cried. Then, burning through the last magic reserves I had, I drew on Lümidia’s strength to unleash an arrow—the Deep

Ossium Tribute harpoon. It deflected the sword about two meters away from me, then fell to the ground much too far away for me to retrieve. A normal arrow wouldn't have been able to divert the sword's mass, and I'd run out of every last drop of Lümidia's strength. I'd never had much magic, but now I could generate no more miracles.

The sword made a wide U-turn and came rushing back at me through the dark, like a shark shooting through the ocean deep.

My next move, I need a move. I don't—

"Squad Member Souya," Isolla said, then disconnected herself from my waist. She started randomly shining lights around and blaring a slew of sound effects. "Think back to your conversation with Lady Zenobia. There lies the clue to your only option for—," she managed to say before the blade drove through her, shattering her to pieces.

My thoughts drowned in anguish and despair. The sword continued, making another wide turn back to me. Taking Isolla's advice, I recalled my conversation with Zenobia as if rewinding a moving picture. For some reason, almost like it'd been waiting for just this moment, the scene came to me without any resistance—accompanied by a low, beastly growl.

"Rha Varzu Duin Gargantua," I recited, invoking the beast-hunting king. The next words out of my mouth were name of the king of the beasts. "Rha Guzüri Duin Olossal. *We shall despise the ancient source of our blood for all eternity.*"

The Babelian Benediction translated the words I spoke, giving them new meaning. Saying both names in succession pulled the trigger. My senses sharpened; all sound and color disappeared; time itself stopped. New knowledge burned into my brain. *This* was the true name of the beast-hunting king. However, the resentment stewing in the descendants he'd left behind had placed a curse on it.

Those children were born to be heroes in the world of men, taught they were descended from a glorious historical tradition, and trained to follow in their forebears' footsteps. They fought and fought and fought, only to learn the meaning of true despair in their final moments—that the blood of the foul beasts they reviled more than anything flowed through their veins. These

humans had decimated the ancient beastfolk and oppressed their smaller counterparts as if nothing could be more natural. Secure in that mindset, they grew, lived, and prospered. Only at the very end of their roads did they come to know how far inferior they were to the race they despised.

It made all the sense in the world that they'd want to curse whoever and whatever had gotten the whole thing started. Their desire had given birth to a demon, a scourge strangely commensurate with their unhallowed blood. On second thought, perhaps the curse contaminating their heinous blood itself had corrupted the king's name.

Zenobia hadn't lied. Something more terrifying than cutting your own ear off did in fact happen. Bitter, raging voices of descendants stretching back hundreds of years rushed into my brain. I vomited blood. My left eye and ear imploded. This curse that pulverized the flesh and destroyed the entrails of all it touched ran through my body. And yet—the beast within me awoke. It whispered to me. *Kill him.*

Time began to flow once more. My eye and ear burned as they regenerated. The ryvius hanging from my neck boiled over. Just like when I'd fought Sanperié's beast, this phenomenon, this strength, this miracle responded to the curse of the beast. Or was this another curse, too?

With a swing of my lycan bow I repelled the incoming sword; an ear-splitting metallic *clang* trailed off after. The wind howled. All my senses heightened to unfathomable extremes. My right arm began to squirm; it felt as though a snake were crawling beneath my skin. Heuress's gauntlet dug into my swollen forearm and drew a light trickle of blood.

The blade made another round and drove back toward me with even greater force. I caught it right as it plunged for my face—with my bare hands. My skin and bones, both theoretically softer than it, instead stopped it with ease. I knocked the enchanted sword to my bow. Suppressing its resistance with the power surging within me, I drew the bowstring. Pushed beyond their limits, parts of my body burst open, simultaneously breaking down and regenerating. Pain circled throughout. I bared my teeth and bit down hard to bear it.

The lycan bow began to transform, as if absorbing the strength that gushed

out of me. It grew and grew and grew, until it was as long and thick as a giant's bow. It creaked and bent, building up unbelievable levels of tension. My eyes fixed on Werner, though he should have been too far away to see. I could even hear him breathing.

"You can have this back," I whispered, and released the magic blade. It exploded through the air, breaking the sound barrier and pushing me back with the momentum. The lycan bow broke; its bowstring snapped and whipped against the meadow ground. Nonetheless, the sword charged with undeniable certainty back toward its owner at more than twice the speed with which it had originally rushed toward me. For a moment, I saw what it saw, as if part of my senses had transferred to it. The blade, home to its own will much like that of a beast, pierced the hero's heart.

"Ugh." I vomited blood. For a second, everything went black. Then I started to burn, as if I'd swallowed fistfuls of fire. I don't mean that figuratively. My skin smoldered; steam rose from my muscles. This ungodly heat ravaged my body only for it to immediately regenerate once more. My ryvius levels, once almost overflowing, plummeted.

I willed my legs to move, then started to run. *Hurry. He's right there. Run. It's just five kilometers.*

"Ah!"

I collapsed. All sound disappeared. My field of vision split; a sticky curtain of blood fell over it. Digging my nails into the earth, I started to crawl. If I could just get a little—no, I had to make it all the way. My job wasn't over. I hadn't accomplished anything yet. I could rest after I'd finished everything. And if I died, at least I'd rest like the dead.

Move. Die if you have to. But move.

The world turned dim and stagnant. Someone stood in the corner of the shadows. Instinctively, I recognized her as a woman. I noted her presence but paid no attention and kept going. Both my legs stopped working. My left arm could no longer move, either. But my right arm still had life. It would do. With that single hand, I dragged my heavy, feverish body.

"You fool," came a voice. Though I couldn't even hear the wind blow, for

some reason it came through loud and clear.

Who's that? Lana? Can't be. Either way, don't try to stop me. This is my fool's errand. If I don't do this, I'll be no better than a pig.

"Souya."

"Lady...Myth...lanica?" Ohhh, huh. It's just my goddess.

A soft, familiar obstacle blocked my path, then gently lifted my head. I felt a relief so great that it seemed to beckon me toward death.

"I meant to commend you sooner, but excellent work slaying the Dark Crown. The infamy, hatred, and envy you garnered delivered true pleasure unto your Mythlanica the Malevolent. I hereby grant you my graces. As you struggle so clumsily, soiled with bloody vomit, there can be no mistake—you are undeniably my disciple."

My right arm gave. I could barely even breathe.

Dark flames, burn this body in tandem with the curses within. This feeble vessel can bear no more..... Ah, ohhh, now I get it. This is her—

"Mythlanica of the Dark Flame inquires once more: No honor shall your blade reap, no glory shall your blood acquire, no peace shall your soul enjoy. Despite this, should you continue down this path, one day you shall lose everything, forget all, be forgotten, and, destitute, fall into terrible loneliness. Souya, my beloved, sole disciple. Dost thou have the fortitude to fight, to overcome even death? If thou hast no objections, state thy name and pledge thyself to me..... Swear it."

I couldn't speak. More and more of my body shut down as I succumbed. Pathetic though it was, this was all I had. This was where it ended. I knew I hadn't had any other choice, but trying a death curse that just went and killed me had turned out to be a goddamn idiotic move. I had known all along I was stupid, though.

But, well, if this is really the end of everything, I might as well go out like a man. I can push out one more sentence.

Fueled by nothing but that resolve, I willed my heart to beat again.

“...I.....Sou...ya.....gi.....swear. I swear...my all...to you—”

“I hereby forgive thee. I absolve thee of all thy sins. Therefore, your blood, your bones, your cries of resentment, every single drop of cursed fluid that runs through thee now belong to me.”

Then, placing her lips over my blood-and-vomit-stained mouth, she began to suck. The Ancient Blood curse disappeared along with the fire burning through it. My heart, which had very nearly stopped, began to slowly beat again. Though weak, I could feel my own strength return.

“Now, stand, my disciple, so that you may do what must be done, attain what must be attained, and steal what must be stolen. Then once again call upon my name and draw strength from my miracles and my grace.”

Revitalized with her gentle healing, I balled my hands into fists. Then, my eyesight restored, I looked upon my goddess.

“Oh, good.”

“What is?”

“You’re crazy gorgeous.”

It was enough to make you cry. A darkly stunning beauty with long raven hair, she had a slim figure with skin that shone white against the black of night, very much like a Japanese-style vampire. She wore an open-backed black dress and no shoes on her bare feet. Her chest—well, it wasn’t actually as big as I’d expected, but was so perfectly shaped it could drive you mad. The vast majority of men would easily fall victim to her charms and hand her everything they possessed. A bewitching spirit entirely unlike her divinity resided in her *golden eyes*.



When I imagined how her red, thin lips had just grazed my own—a confused mix of emotions hit me before I could feel any lust, for some reason.

“Haaaaaaaah, you insolent devotee.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just, I’ve only ever seen you as a mangy cat.”

She rubbed her cheeks against mine, as she always did in her feline form. Not even the blood that smeared her face could tarnish my goddess’s beauty.

“You may also pray to me *in your bed*. However, that will come in time. Now go.”

“Going.”

Extracting myself from my goddess’s embrace, I stood up. I walked forward, never looking back. Lady Mythlanica watched over me as I went; I didn’t have to check to be sure of it. Every muscle in my body cried out in pain. But I could walk. I could keep going. For now, all I could do was go on and on and on. I alternated, stepping first with my right leg, then with my left. When the pain made it too difficult to use both, I hobbled along with one. One step at a time, little by little, I closed the space between myself and my enemy.

“So.....ya.....” A signal mixed with white noise came in.

“Isolla?”

“.....Ye.....send.....age.”

The call cut out, but not before a message reached me. It contained a note and an incantation.

I’m sending you a spell I put together after compiling all the data we’ve collected on this world. Please put it to good use. This will be the last thing I ever do for you.

The word *last* tugged at my heart. Even if Isolla’s mini kettle got destroyed, her personality would still be stored in Machina. We could just get her another pot and she’d be like new. But right now, I had no time to assuage my doubts.

“This will come in handy, Isolla.”

Limping along with a leg dragging behind me, slowly but surely, at a snail’s

pace, I finally made it before the hero.

“Sup,” I greeted him, as if calling out to a dear friend of ten years. Perhaps I could thank my brush with the curse that the Lillideans bore, but I felt a little closer to him.

“Drop dead,” he snarled. Arrows had pierced both of His Heroicness’s legs, and his own sword was thrust through one of his lungs, but he evidently still had enough energy left to give me sass. Maybe it was because the same blood ran through his veins, but I thought I caught a shadow of Arvin in his countenance.

“Fine, you win. Take my head to the church, to Ellusion, and declare your petty war on all heroes. You will not die a pleasant death. First, your friends, your family, and your relatives will be crushed like worms. You will curse and lament the day you ever laid a hand on a hero until, with your final breath, you beg for oblivion and expire.”

How lighthearted. It actually felt nice, after all the hundreds of years of resentment that had flowed through me. Might as well set him straight.

“I’m not gonna kill *you*.”

“What did you say?” asked Werner quizzically before vomiting blood. No matter how tough he was, he was not long for this world.

“I’m going *monster* hunting tonight,” I told him.

A long.

Long.

Long, silent pause came back.

“Ha.....ha-ha.” Deathly pale from blood loss, his face clouded over with desperation.

I wasn’t going to kill any hero. A terrifying beast attacking Remlia, though—now that I would kill.

“My goddess, O St. Lillideas,” Werner began, reaching up for the heavens. “Faithful to your teachings, I have overcome all manner of difficulty. In the name of protecting the most hallowed of blood, I have carried out the vilest of

tasks without complaint, even struck the life of a babe from this world, and yet.....is this how you repay your hero? You dare tell me this is how I meet my end? I cannot accept this. I *will not* suffer this! Out here in this godforsaken land, by some lowly knave?! I, Werner Carbezzo, am a beast-hunting hero! A hero should never die in such disgrace!!!” he railed, then started violently coughing before hacking up blood. Shamefully, the great hero began to sob.

“O goddess, my goddess, tell me. Where did I go wrong? I abided by all your lessons, brought glory to my nation, slew beasts, and lived as I was told to live. Wherein lies my crime? Why.....why do these things lurk in our blood—” It was hard to watch. Truly the height of disgusting. “O goddess of mine, save me.”

You idiot. Lillideas is saving the whole goddamn lot of you as we speak.

Gods were not omnipotent; their powers had limits. How could he not see the devotion she’d desperately poured into containing the beast within him until the brink of death, until his soul departed?

Lillideas had done what she could to cure them. That’s all—that’s all there was to it. No desire for fame or glory had entered her calculations. She’d risked even death to save her people. But her wish hadn’t come true. Her teachings had been corrupted and manipulated, but through it all, she’d repressed the beasts over and over again. And after all that—

“—I’ll curse you all. First you, Otherworlder, then your nasty friends, King Remlia, all adventurers, the popes, the Black Elves, the asinine citizens of Ellusion, the aristocratic swine, all the knights, Dilbard, the whole world. A curse be upon you! May you be defiled and rot like this flesh of mine, and in your final moments, mutate into a beast like me!”

—ironically, another curse was born. Her pure intentions founded a country whose people carried a poison in their bowels. Then, at the hour of their deaths, their grandchildren disgorged the beasts in their bellies, entangled people from all walks of life in their misfortune, and died, one by one.

Forced to incessantly witness this tragedy, even the gods might want to forget everything and live *free as a cat, without a care in the world*. No one can fathom the weight of a deity’s worries.

Werner’s consciousness expired, a broken smile taking him to meet his end.

For a moment, nothing but the sound of the wind broke the quiet. Then the beast within him was called to awaken. My heart began to pound in response, as if sounding an alarm bell. The liquid in my ryvius came to a boil.

Werner's body flung itself backward, spewing blood everywhere. His bones crunched, then jutted out from his flesh and stretched. New muscles grew around the freshly sprouted bones to support them. His face melted, his eyeballs and teeth plopped out, and fresh organs formed in their places. He was huge, all over the place, and revolting.

"Hey, Arvin. Your friend Sanperié had some balls. He fought his despair all alone in the darkness of the dungeon, yet he still managed to suppress the devil within him and bore his burden with true perseverance. He was admirable, a hell of a knight. Just look at this—this pathetic, shameless, depraved beast."

A howl like a boar's death rattle resounded through the moonlit night. But this voice that aimed to prevent all miracles would not work against me. This was Lady Mythlanica's protection. Mere moments ago, she had sucked the deadly curse out of me, rendering it harmless. To think that the woman who'd gone down as the Goddess of Malevolence could relieve people of their sinful curses—it didn't get more ironic than that. That was why I felt more pity than fear for these beasts.

And so Werner Carbezzo transformed into what I assumed was a sham version of the Ancient Beasts his predecessors had decimated. He stood about six meters tall and four meters wide with an enormous, overflowing belly that folded over his lower body. His short arms retained some semblance to those in his previous life; conversely, about five fur-covered legs sprouted from his torso. The armor he wore shattered, while the enchanted sword and both arrows disappeared into rolls of flesh. Half-bovine, half-cervine, his new face bore no resemblance to anything human.

And still the mutation continued. Could this be a compilation of all the beasts he'd killed? He had a raptor's talons, a horse's hooves, deer horns, snake eyes, and six tails, each belonging to a different species. Large, gaping mouths appeared all over his body, each lined with rows and rows of razor-sharp teeth. Wings burgeoned from him, too, and dwarfed his own body. Only when I saw they were nothing but bones and would almost definitely never fly did I feel any

relief.

One thing stood out to me: a mysterious beast that sprouted from his shoulder. It bore a striking resemblance to the figure stamped on every silver coin.

Damn, that poor, poor guy. I can't even hate him anymore.

After unsheathing Arvin's sword, I gripped it with both hands. I could at the very least try to look knightly, gallant like him. I began to recite Isolla's words.

"O Mythlanica of the Dark Flame, I alone am servant to thee, she who devours curses and hunts down evil scourges. Rha Warz Duin Gargantua, *we shall despise the ancient source of our blood for all eternity*. By the power of this curse birthed of resentment resounding, I shall call forth the beast. O infinitely burning Dark Flame, monstress who gorges on vexations, grant me your power. My divine goddess, exorcise this demon and forgive him his sins.

"I shall house this beast within me as I am. I shall hunt down this beast as a human. No dawn never breaks, no dream never ends. This calamitous, contaminated blood, too, shall one day dry and wither. But for now, may the hunter's night descend."

The glass on my ryvius's vial cracked, and red steam seeped from the fissure. Once again, the curse of the Ancient Blood began gnawing at my flesh. Unescapable death permeated the air.

However, that death reversed its course. The powerful malediction turned into faint green lights that flittered and danced over the meadow like fireflies. On this night, under my goddess's spell, all curses were converted to pure energy. This hex destined to defile people for eternity was transformed into an enormous source of energy—a world-altering force. It turned into a tremendous miracle that gave a mere Otherworlder, just a small, ordinary human, the power to stalk and slay a gargantuan monster all on his own.

This—

"Isolla Romea Wild Hunt"

—was a spell wrought by an artificial intelligence, drawn from the wisdom of she who fell in love with a man. My sharpened senses stretched out forever in

every direction. This supreme power whipped up a powerful gale with a single swing of my sword. For a brief moment, I had in my hands the might to vanquish even a hero with ease.

“Come on, Arvin.”

Let's take him down.

This is for your glory—Arvin Forths Gassim's final battle.

You said it, didn't you? That there's nothing we can't do. I couldn't tell you at the time, but now, with this blade, I finally can.

You got that right. There's not a goddamn thing we can't do.

CHAPTER 5

Inferno

A naked sword flashed again and again, cleaving off chunks of flesh that scattered and plopped down throughout the meadow. Beneath the moonlit Otherworldly sky, a beast and a knight engaged in fierce battle.

The gargantuan, hideous monster loomed over the small, sword-wielding knight. Yet this knight wore no armor and carried no shield. Neither his clothing nor his cape were of this world. However, the steel in his hand and the skill with which he brandished it proved him a true knight.

The beast went into a maddened frenzy. It flailed its limbs around haphazardly as it tried to pulverize the small figure, but it could not land a single blow. A silver web of light glittered. The monster bellowed as the slashes dug into his skin, claiming all his tails and half his body. Enough blood to flow from the deaths of a hundred humans gushed out.

The knight pushed on, as if to say, *Look*.

“Witness my battle. I shall continue. None shall stand in my way. I shall slice away even this bloody rain falling upon me. My friend, the ‘true knight,’ was nothing like this despicable creature. He was better than that. He would have never cowered, never shown fear, never lost.”

The beast’s body squirmed, then shot out another mammoth arm. Densely covered in thick hair, it dwarfed the entire creature itself. It reached out as if to snatch one of the moons from its perch, then came down toward me.

And? What of it?

A single slash—the monstrous arm went flying. I approached the beast, embodying my ideal knight. Composed, dignified, I aimed for its neck and heart. Seeming to sense that, it produced yet more tails and resisted. A snake’s tail on par with the dragonoise neck rushed at me. Flesh squished, crunched; dirt flew

from the impact.

I seized that appendage with both hands like taking candy from a baby. My five fingers shattered scales harder than armor, crushed the thick muscles beneath, and ripped the whole thing off.

After unleashing an even louder, hair-raising wail, the dumb beast lost its balance and offered its neck to me on a platter. In a split second, I relieved it of its head, careful not to tarnish the honor of the real knight's grandfather. With my return stroke, I slashed for its heart. Though the deformed, misshapen monster writhed violently, it could not hide its heart from me.

I put all the amped-up swordsmanship I wielded into a single, lethal blow that—failed to cleave the beast's heart. Something rebuffed my strike, pushing me far away.

“Loyal, aren't we?”

Sparks bloomed like fireworks in the darkness. The enchanted sword assaulted me, trying to protect its master turned monster. Neither its speed nor its heft nor its intent to kill could compare to what it had been before. With my newfound power, I knew right away that this blade possessed masterful skill—expertise fit for a hero. *Even less reason to give a shit about it, then,* I thought, beating it back. I drove down hard, trying to shatter it, but managed only to send some cracks running down the length of its blade. Just then, however, the weapon stopped. A turbulent, evil gale began to violently whip up out of nowhere.

“*Urgh!*” I groaned as a thick, warped arrow—no, a monstrous claw—I couldn't rebuff sank into my thigh.

Its head and the missing half of its body regrown, the beast had spread its bone wings out wide. Innumerable strings of the claws hung from each. The flightless freak flapped its wings, stirring up raging gusts that launched its vicious claws through the air in such overwhelming numbers that they cast a shadow over the night.

Clenching the hilt of my sword between my teeth, I grabbed all the arrows from my quiver and hurled them at the talons, each one leaving a fiery comet tail in its wake. Still, the claws came down in overwhelming numbers. I switched

back to my blade and spun it with godly speed, but the talons pierced both my legs and my left shoulder regardless. I gritted my teeth.

What is pain to me? You won't make me scream.

The mutant ruffled its wings, conjuring more and more talons, loading bullets to attack. A curtain of beastly claws obscured the night sky.

Don't you dare shrink from this.

Giving my body no other orders, I furiously slashed my weapon. It was a doomed endeavor, like slicing through a raging waterfall, but I kept going. Even after my field of vision closed in and I could see no more, I persisted. I heard my muscles get squashed along with the crunching of my bones. That was accompanied by the sound of my blood spewing out. The beast reveled in vile jubilation, but my heart pounded louder still.

Don't think you can snuff out the Dark Flame of my covenant with this shit.

A single swipe of my blade cleared my view, blasting away an enormous wave of talons that stretched out like a field of billowing grass in just one move.

My body burned. Like a scorching fire, it raged hotter and hotter within me until it reached such blistering temperatures that it incinerated the claws digging through my flesh into ash.

I felt heavy. Time itself slowed under the weight of my form. Quicker than it took a drop of blood to reach the ground, I closed the gap between me and the beast, lopped off its head with a single blow, and, with the next, rent its heart in two.

"Rgh!"

My senses, heightened to the extreme, snapped back. A muddy fatigue and promises of sweet death whispered to me.

No, not yet.

Other hearts beat within the beast. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven pulses I could perceive. Now eight. All out of sync, beating chaotically, with what felt like endless energy.

"Ooh yeah, that's what I like."

The monstrosity pounced, regrowing limbs, shooting out talons, and lashing its tails at me. I cut them all down, too many attacks to count, and stabbed its hearts to death, one by one. It was as if we were trapped in the lowest pits of hell, doomed for all eternity to continue this struggle to the grave.

I stabbed the beast's eighteenth heart, but more kept stubbornly beating—not that I had any plans to give in, either. Nothing could keep me from continuing to butcher him. I'd hunt down this prey if it destroyed my soul.

Swimming in an ocean of steely blades, I carved away at the savage brute who fought back with limitless regeneration. Amid the storm of flying flesh and blood, I noticed a woman in the corner of my augmented senses. She had long raven hair and looked at once like an elegant dame, a young girl, and a mother, though she was in fact my goddess. And she was *kneeling*. Her hands clasped together, she knelt on the ground and prayed.

Whom would a goddess pray to? What is she praying for?

But before I could explore these questions further, the gaping mouth lunging for me cut off my train of thought. I managed to freeze the beast in place, but then its entire body mutated into a colossal maw that now threatened to swallow me whole. Thrusting my sword through the roof of the mouth, I dug my foot between the fangs of its lower jaw and resisted with all my might.

“Ugh!” Its powerful jaws clamping down on me forced blood to spew out of my body. I couldn't hold out for long. Endless rows of fine teeth lined the cavernous maw. They wouldn't need more than a second to pulverize me into mincemeat. While desperately trying to come up with a plan, I heard someone pray:

“My goddess, grant this man your mercy, your devotion, and the grace of your divine protection.”

For a moment, I thought I'd hallucinated the quiet voice—but then a real miracle occurred. A globe of light enveloped me, staving off the demonic fangs. It shone delicate, yet strong. Then a pocket on my fatigues began to faintly sparkle in response—the one where I'd safely tucked away my keepsake of Arvin, his emblem.

His spell swelled into a gigantic sphere, cleaving an enormous gash in the

beast's mouth, then its stomach. Far back in the depths of its guts, I spotted a heart. This one belonged to no beast: Pulsing in a shallow, frantic rhythm, it was human indeed. It seemed the monster had generated hordes of other hearts to hide this one from me.

“Guess my endgame needs some work, too.”

I laughed derisively at myself. Twisting my mouth into a feral grin, I glared at the beast like a wolf staring down his prey. The protective light he'd summoned disappeared; his sword flickered. One thing I now knew for sure: Miracles did not simply come to you. You had to beg and plead and chant and fight and struggle, offer all you had to offer—only then would they come within reach.

This world probably had as many gods as it did prayers. I prayed to them all, not caring if their answer came absolutely drowning in irony.

Please, grant my friend glory.

The final strike cleaved the night sky in two, and the beast with it.

EPILOGUE

The manic, frantic night gave way to dawn. Carrying two swords and a large bundle wrapped in a cloak, I prepared for my audience with the king, as planned. First, though, I went back to camp and got cleaned up, telling myself the whole time, *You just watched over the fight. That's right.*

Everyone whose presence I'd requested attended the audience. On my right sat the marquis and knight attendant Luxgarre; on my left I had Pops, there to corroborate my story, as well as Lana, Éa, Shuna, and Bel. My friends' stares pained me. *You better explain yourself*, they all screamed at me. It was truly unbearable. I couldn't let that get me off track, though; I had to tie up the last loose ends.

"King Remlia, allow me to apologize in advance before I unveil the *hideous monstrosity* I've brought before you. I beg you to please hear what I have to say before passing any judgment."

Very well, he signaled with a slight nod. Lanceil stood at his side, nervous; perhaps she'd caught on. The asinine prince, by the way, had been booted off to the Left Continent for "training."

"This story begins three days ago, when my party and I encountered a monster within the dungeon, a terrifying foe with the power to render our ryviuses useless. We managed to wound the beast, but in the end, it slipped away from us. Following a plan proposed by Lord Medîm in consideration of the monster's singular ability, we pursued it with only a select few forces. During the treacherous search, one adventurer who'd lent us her assistance, Lieutette, lost her life. We then discovered a hidden path and followed it until it led us to a ruined dungeon buried in a grassy meadow to the west of the kingdom.

"There we slew the beast, only to discover the true horror concealed within it. Immense and powerful, this fierce monster also had the ability to nullify our ryviuses. Availing ourselves of his personal connection to my friend, we enlisted

the beast-hunting hero Werner Carbezzo to aid our cause. Tragically, my friend Arvin Forths Gassim and Sir Werner—”

My throat caught. Once I said it out loud, he’d really be dead. I had to face the truth. There was no other choice.

“—sacrificed their lives to vanquish the monster.”

I unwrapped Werner’s cape to display the severed head of a revolting beast no one could place. The ladies winced at the sight; the marquis collapsed, his knees buckling beneath him. Only Luxgarre’s eyes flew wide open in shock.

I’d given Werner half the credit as a point of concession. Could there be a more heroic death than throwing one’s life down in battle to protect an allied kingdom? At least, it felt much more noble than secretly wishing a pox on the entire world before some nobody gouged your heart out.

“Medîm, is this true?” the king asked.

“Indeed. It was a valiant, honorable fight—for both of them.” Pops stepped up to the severed head and placed Werner’s emblem beside it. I lay Arvin’s and both of their swords alongside it.

“King Remlia, I’d like to make a suggestion, if I may.”

“Aye, let us hear it.”

Time to get down to real business. “My departed friend Arvin had an elder sister who is currently incarcerated. If you would be so gracious, I’d like to ask you to consider making an appeal for her release on his behalf in honor of his achievement in slaying the beast for—”

“Silence! It is not your place as an insolent, insignificant adventurer to ask anything of your king!” Lanceil shouted at me, sounding maybe a little overly dramatic. King Remlia curbed her.

“Very well. This young man risked his life in battle for Remlia. In fact, we might have him and his heroic deeds to thank for saving our country. I vow by my name that I shall seek this pardon for his sister. Furthermore, let us also prepare a humble yet proper ceremony for Sir Werner the hero as..... Sir Luxgarre?”

Luxgarre had brandished his blade.

“Ah,” I blurted out like an idiot.

I’d completely let my guard down. This dude was a knight of standing, which I’d assumed meant he wouldn’t dare shed blood before the king of an allied nation. I wasn’t alone; even Pops had only managed to place his hand on the hilt of his sword. Everything around me seemed to move in slow motion. I saw what was coming, but my body didn’t come close to keeping up. Shuna, Lanceil, and even Éa were jumping into action. I met Lana’s eyes.

Sorry, I’m dead.

Would she get everything I tried to convey in that brief second? That was the only question on my mind.

The blade bore down on an undeniable and inescapable path to divorce me from my head. I didn’t have time to try anything in my defense. This was where it all ended for me. Brave and composed, I shut my eyes. Metal clashed; I smelled smoldering iron.

“_____”

My head.....hadn’t gone anywhere. I opened my eyes to see that Luxgarre’s blade had been stopped—by Werner’s sword. The enchanted weapon, free to move of its own accord, had jumped up to protect the man who’d murdered its master.

What in the actual hell?

Luxgarre broke out into a huge smile and tossed his sword away. In that same instant, the magic blade fell to the ground. The knight stretched both hands up toward the heavens, as if trying to grasp something.

“Ha! Ha-ha-ha! HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!!!” he bellowed from the bottom of his gut, looking positively ecstatic, almost like a child who had discovered hidden treasure. We all froze at the outlandish scene.

“O St. Lillideas!” Luxgarre cried. “I’ve finally found him! I plotted against my comrades, schemed against my master, even sacrificed the hero I served—!! Finally! At long last! I’ve found the wedge to bring salvation unto Ellusion! This

fiendish hero! He will be the one to lift our unholy curse! My goddess, I beg of you! Please, take him into your—”

“You damn fool, have you lost your mind?!” growled King Remlia. His blade drawn, he stood immediately behind Luxgarre, who’d lost himself in a feverish mania.

Damn, His Highness had some skill. His sword cleaved cleanly through Luxgarre’s clavicle and sternum before rending his heart in two, then severed the man’s head from his body on its way out. The knight’s head tumbled around on the floor, a crazed smile still plastered on its face.

“Ee! Eeek!”

Coincidentally enough, that uncorked cranium rolled to a stop at the marquis’s feet. Fresh blood spewed like a fountain from the decapitated body and rained down on the beastly bust.

“Marquis Huinitte!”

“Y-yeesh!” He crumpled under the ferocious menace in Remlia’s voice and let more than one thing come spilling out of him.

“Inform your country of this knight’s evil deeds at once! Do not dare omit the disgraceful trouble he imposed on me, do you hear?!”

“Y-yes, Your Majesty!” the marquis squeaked, vigorously nodding before he practically ran out of the room.

Having heard the commotion inside, soldiers and maids entered in his place. One of the maids shrieked at the sight of the monstrous head and the knight’s lifeless corpse. The king rebuked them all and ordered them to clean up the mess. Instantly, a flood of people rushed into the audience chamber.

“Souya, I shall send further instruction at a later date. For the present, rest with your companions,” Remlia instructed.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. If you’ll excuse me.” I bowed to him, then retreated from the chamber, my party members following.

Lanceil led us out into the hallway, where everyone gathered round. Without saying a word, Lana jumped into my arms. Éa embraced me, too. I crushed

them close. Half crying, Shuna gripped my arm.

“Sorry I’m so late.” *Ahh, I’m finally home, finally free of that long, painful dungeon.*

“Welcome home, darling,” Lana murmured near my ears. Her voice sank into my heart.

“Geez, you’re so late, Yaya!”

“Sorry.”

“Seriously.”

“My bad,” I apologized to Éa and Shuna. “Where’s...Zenobia?”

I wasn’t playing dumb—I needed to double-check what they believed. Knowing her, she’d probably found a clever way to say good-bye to them all.

“It seems her father has fallen ill, so she had to rush home on short notice,” my wife explained. “She kept urging us to send you her regards until the last minute.” I simply nodded. A bland, plain reason—very on-brand for her.

“Darling?”

“Yaya?”

“Sorry.”

Once I breathed in the sisters’ scents and felt their warm arms around me, whatever had kept me upright to that point caved in. I’m ashamed to admit I let all my body weight fall on them. I flickered in and out of consciousness. After all, I’d spent all night jumping back and forth over the border between life and death. My body had been running on basically nothing but willpower at this point. I’d reached my limit’s limit.

“You guys should know that Arvin went out in glory. Just don’t.....don’t ever forget that.”

Then I let my grip on consciousness slip. Somewhere in a deep, dark pool of relief, I heard a voice I didn’t recognize say:

“Found you.”

At least, that’s what I thought I’d heard. Such trivial details meant nothing to

me, though. I simply let my mind drift and pleasantly melt away, back to the soft place I called home.



One day, a certain rumor started circulating around town.

In an abandoned dungeon some distance outside of the Kingdom of Remlia, a bloodthirsty beast had appeared, one they say rivaled a dragon in its ferocity. A merchant who witnessed it said the terrifying sight alone was enough to drive you mad. It had hundreds of limbs, each arm gripping all manner of weapons, and each foot taloned with cruel, razor-sharp nails. The monster could shred anything and anyone to pieces; its cry would make your ears explode, and looking upon it would turn you to stone. It was a truly fearsome beast.

Had it breached the Kingdom of Remlia's walls, it would have certainly claimed hundreds of lives. However, a lone adventurer had vanquished the beast, sacrificing his life in the battle. His name: Arvin, also known as Arvin the Dragon Scale. Countless adventurers had saved Remlia from danger in the past, but none could claim to have relinquished their lives in so valiant, virtuous, or knightly a manner as he.

And so on went the rumor. This one, though, hadn't come from me. At the same time, I did have a pretty good idea of who'd started it. Was she still in Remlia? For all I knew, I could've passed her on the street and been none the wiser.

We still waited on news about the request for Arvin's sister's pardon. The Central Continent had fallen into extreme, unfettered chaos. No one could predict how much attention King Remlia's plea could capture amid that mess. All I could do now was sit tight.

Out of three Lillidean knights, one had gone missing in the dungeon, one had fallen in battle against a monster, and the last had gone mad and died at King Remlia's blade. How would Ellusion respond to all this news? We had yet to find out on that point as well.

In addition to those problems, two other issues kept me up at night. The first: Werner's sword, Agaccion the Holy Blade. It had somehow grown attached to

me. Maybe there were better ways to say that, but in any case, this blade that should've been safely stored in the royal palace had wound up sneakily slipping into my tent. No matter how many times I tried returning it, and even if I chained it in place, locked it in a steel box, or had Ghatt discard it at the bottom of the ocean as a last resort, it always found its way back.

I'd actually attempted to break it, but pounding away at it with my hammer hadn't even left a scratch. When I ordered Machina to try, it wound up leaving her circular saw with a few fewer teeth. After the weapon's tenth unwanted invasion, I had Machina thoroughly investigate it to find a way to either destroy or stop it. This led to a curious discovery.

"Mr. Souya, about Aggy," Machina started. *Aggy?* "Aggy was made with the same nido structure that was used to produce us machina systems."

"Huh?" For some reason, modern technology had been applied to this Otherworldly blade.

"That being said, it isn't composed of the soft metal, cadmium, used in machina systems. Aggy was constructed out of the strongest, most durable material imaginable by reconfiguring wurtzite boron nitride as a nido structure. The techniques employed in creating a nido alloy are Japanese proprietary technologies; that being the case, a block has been installed on all artificial intelligence instruments to prevent us from analyzing qualifying materials. However, as this item originated here in the Other Dimension, it falls outside the bounds of the protective lock, and I was able to reverse engineer the process used to create it."

So she'd found a way to pirate it?

"I then applied that technology to reassemble Mr. Shuna's longsword," she announced, presenting me with the boy's repaired sword like she'd just pulled it out of an Easy-Bake. Golden, veinlike threads streaked down the length of the blade. "I used melted Mythlanic gold to bind the pieces together in the traditional Japanese *kintsugi* style."

".....But this must've cost a fortune, right?"

"Listen and be amazed, for I purchased it all at a fixed market rate for three hundred gold coins," she proudly announced.

You little...! “A-and where exactly did you get that kind of cash?” I could count every last coin I owned and not have seventy gold.

“I took out loans from the Zavah Night Owl and Ellomere trade groups in your name.”

“What the—?!” A life in debt. I came to a whole other dimension, yet here I am living a life in debt.

“Don’t worry. According to my calculations, if we continue our side business along with your adventuring, we should be able to repay it in about two hundred and fifty days, probably!”

That’s almost all the time I’ve got to do my job here! I didn’t come all this way to be repaying bills! I came for money—for money?

Huh? My head feels a bit hazy.

“Also, I’ll go ahead and give Aggy a makeover. We don’t want to get into trouble for using a stolen sword.”

“Yeah, please, please do.” For what it was worth, Agaccion did listen to me and would come when I called. It would also copy my movements if I held my hand out over it. Additionally, the blade seemed have some level of intelligence—it could understand simple addition. Machina had started teaching it multiplication.

Can I trust it, though? Well, I guess it’s best to use all the tools I’ve got available.

My second concern: my body. Both of my pupils had changed, and I could now see at night. However, Machina’s retinal scan could no longer recognize me. My DNA had also mutated in some unmeasurable way. As a pretty risky last resort, I set up a phrase with the power to override Machina’s systems. It’s hard to understate how dangerous this was. If by any chance I were tortured or brainwashed and coughed it up, all modern knowledge and technology would leak into this world through Machina.

Forget about technological innovation—that kind of data could help someone take over a smaller country, or even the entire world. Though desperate times called for emergency measures, I still had some lingering anxiety over the

decision. If I could find another way around it later, I would definitely implement it.

Oh yeah, and the broken lycan bow had just up and fixed itself. It looked even more ominous than it had before. It had also adjusted its contours to accommodate new functions. Shaped like a W with white, clawlike aggregate growing out of it in a few different places, it had converted itself into a composite bow comprised of multiple materials. The string on this bow pulled more flexibly than before and could build even greater tension. It felt as if this new and improved instrument was telling me, *You'd better use me when you slay your next beast.*

One day, Lord Baafre wandered over to the campsite. "You'd best get some winter clothes ready. The cold bites up in the North," he told me.

I don't wanna gooo. I only came here to explore the dungeon, but all these other tasks just keep popping up. And I know I'll meet another beast again. I have to be ready for it. One ace up my sleeve won't be enough to set my mind at ease.

Aside from that, everyone else got busy finding ways to compensate for the party members we'd lost. Bel inherited Arvin's keepsake and became the party's shield. She worked on her swordsmanship at Lady Gladwein's place, looking like a completely different person. Lana and Éa also devoted themselves to training at Lady Gladwein's, brushing up on their swordsmanship and close combat abilities. Not one to be left out, Shuna hadn't stopped working himself to death with unsettling fervor since the moment he got his sword back.

Just a little longer.

Just a bit more and we'd be ready to get delving again. I'd had to part with so much: Arvin. Zenobia. And Isolla.

Isolla's data had not actually been stored inside Machina. Her personality had veered too far away from the regulations, had become too unwieldy to control. Because of this, Machina had designated her a defective product and had refused to synchronize her data. All of Isolla had been in the mini kettle that broke. She'd known it, too. I ordered Machina to repair her, but Isolla herself rejected my request. A message came to me, time stamped just before I cast

Wild Hunt.

Machina is not operating at full functionality. Someone has to objectively evaluate how sound she is, but I do not believe I have that capacity at this point. Nonconforming individuals cannot judge the conforming. I am about to die; however, I am satisfied. I doubt any other AI has ever enjoyed such total satisfaction before their expiration. There can be no more wonderful end for a tool. I protected you. I guided you. I successfully saved you..... I kept my place in your memories. I gave you anything and everything I could offer. Souya, please, I pray you give the next me a death that can stand up to mine—please.

This robot, so full of love, had been a defective product. I couldn't think of anything more ironic than the fact that bots like her desired nothing more than to one day be found similarly aberrant.

I resented Machina. I just couldn't help it. But then, later, I caught her carefully putting the broken Isolla Pot pieces away without reusing any of her components, and tears just flooded from my eyes. I didn't even really know why; I simply wept. Thinking back on both Arvin's death and Zenobia's departure, I stifled my voice and silently sobbed. After crying my eyes out all alone, I felt just a little bit stronger.

[60TH DAY]

On this quiet night, the sisters snored softly in the tent. Though the sound was incredibly faint, I could hear the rising and falling of their breaths. It only made sense; I lay so close to them I could very nearly rub my cheeks against theirs. My little sister had stolen into our bed again, just like always. Once again, the two nestled into each other, fast asleep at my side.

Recently, both Lana and I would come home so exhausted we'd immediately dive into our bed and pass out, which of course left little time for working up to the deed. But seriously, though, sorry, exactly how much further did this world want to test my sanity? Even a saint wouldn't be able to resist with this much temptation, you know? I wanted to shout from the rooftops how proud I was of my own self-restraint. At this point, I felt just a few more nights away from reaching enlightenment.

That said, sneaking a few touches broke no laws, so obviously I helped myself.

I gently poked their cheeks, first Éa's, then Lana's, back and forth. A smirk came naturally to my lips; I admit it was a little creepy. But this was the pinnacle of fun. I could forget time entirely. There was no way I could sleep now, though this wasn't the only thing keeping me awake.

The next day, we would delve into the dungeon again. I was a bundle of nerves. Even though I'd gained new power, my worries just kept stacking up higher and heavier.

"Mrrah."

My goddess in feline form slept by my pillow, belly fully exposed and limbs splayed out in a sleepy jumping jack. Watching her look so relaxed eased the tension I felt a little, too.

"—Good evening."

The corner of the tent flapped open, and something rolled over to me—a miniature AI kettle disguised as a lantern.

"Good evening."

"Forgive my intrusion so late at night while everyone is in repose, but I wanted to say hello to you, squad member," it whispered just barely loud enough for me to hear. "I am Wide Area Combat Program Isolla DC Locally Repaired Model Yukikaze. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Yukikaze?" Kind of an odd name to give an AI bot. I'm pretty sure there was a Japanese war cruiser by that name, a lucky ship at that.

"My predecessor, the scrapped Isolla, specifically requested I take this name, though evidently it has no deeper meaning or relation to anything. You may change it if it displeases you. Would you care to?"

"Nah, Yukikaze's fine. It's a great name." It had a curious ring to it. Maybe I felt a little attached since I was named after a Japanese war cruiser, too?

"If you are not otherwise disposed, please provide a report on all your activities thus far. Since I only activated a few moments ago, I still cannot tell right from left. I desperately need information."

"Don't you have a quantum connection with Machina?" It shouldn't take

more than a second to transfer all our records to her through that.

“Machina entered a dormant state to optimize her functionality after repairing and activating me. I expect she will emerge from this slumber in approximately five hours. It would be a waste to do nothing while I waited.” Had Machina changed her personality with her name, so she wouldn’t end up like the last Isolla?



.....All right. I can't sleep anyway, so I might as well give her an oral report of what's happened so far.

Scooping Yukikaze up in my arms, I scooted away from the sisters a bit. Then quietly, slowly, as if talking to a child, I began to recount our story. I told her of the people we'd met here, of the friends we'd made along the way, of those who'd left, those who'd died. In no way was this a dark retelling. I did all that I could to spin a cheerful, grand yarn. Such was the duty of those who remained thanks to the protection of the departed.

Our adventure had a long way to go. My destination lay deep down in the dungeon. Challenges and reasons for worry would only keep piling up. This would not be my last sleepless night in the long story yet to come. One day—

One day, I would tell the worlds your tale, the story of how you loved me.

THE END

AFTERWORD

Good day, good evening, good morning. I'm the author, Hinagi Asami. Thank you very much for picking up a copy of *The Otherworlder, Exploring the Dungeon*, Vol. 2. This second volume is where we start getting into the meat of the story. Even back when I serialized this online, I constantly urged people to "at least read through to the end of the second chronicle."

As part of reediting the whole series, I had the chance to add new, never-before-seen sections. I had neither the ability as an author nor the time to properly include them when I first ran the story online, and I practically bawled as I cut them from the original text. However, I never stopped looking for the perfect timing to slip them in. Now I feel so incredibly happy to have finally found that moment in the midst of publishing the story in novel form.

Nowadays, an author has an overwhelming number of avenues through which to write and share their novels with the world. The fact that among all those possibilities, my work won an award and from there smoothly moved into publication seems to me simply an incredible stroke of good fortune.

If we consider the period before your first work gets published as the bottom rung for a writer, then I'd say I languished there longer than most. I couldn't tell you how many awards I applied for and lost, but I'm pretty sure I've gotten rejection letters from essentially every light novel or mystery literary competition in Japan. Some friends left my life saying, "Wake up and smell the roses. This isn't going to happen."

But as I mentioned in the afterword to the first volume, I don't like to give up easily, so I refused to throw in the towel. Actually, that's a lie. Every time my work got rejected, I'd fall into a fatalistic depression, print out the story, burn it, roast sweet potatoes over that flame, and eat the tubers, tears streaming down

my face. They added a nice touch of salt.

Over and over again I thought, *I'm never writing again. There's no point.* And yet, as I engaged with movies or novels or anime or video games or music or plays or comedy (the full list is too long to include here, so I'll leave that for another time), I'd kind of find myself picking up the pen once more. I can't really explain it, but maybe that's just what creative writing is like.

With this in my background, I know painfully well how unforgiving the world and reality can be. That's why I believe and try to ensure there must always be an equal price to pay for the “miracles” that occur in this novel. And yet, would you not agree that adding a realistic dash of “hard truth” to a fictional fantasy makes it all the more delicious? Most of the currently popular series string one lucky miracle after another, but people soon lose interest in stories where everything always turns out okay.

With that in mind, after the precipitous rise in good fortune I've had this past half year, I am absolutely terrified to see what awaits me in the next six months and the year after that. I've taken to carefully walking step-by-step up and down stairs, and I also try to give construction sites a wide berth. I pay close attention to any trucks driving by and am particularly careful to watch my back on the way home from the convenience store.

One last thing (with the hope that this is not actually the last such note I'll write)—I would like to express my deep gratitude to my new and previous editors and proofreaders, to Kureta-san for drawing the supremely wonderful illustrations found here, to the *Dragon Novels* editing department, to all the readers who purchased a copy of this book, and to everyone who has collaborated with me on this work.

What with this and that, this series has wound up straddling the border between the Heisei and Reiwa eras. If I'm lucky enough to have a third volume, I look forward to seeing you again there!

This book is a revised and augmented version of *The Otherworlder, Exploring the Dungeon II*, originally serialized on Kakuyomu.jp.

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